THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES
THE MIDNIGHT BLIZZARD
A CINDERELLA RETELLING
MARY MECHAM

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Also by Mary Mecham

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Thank you!
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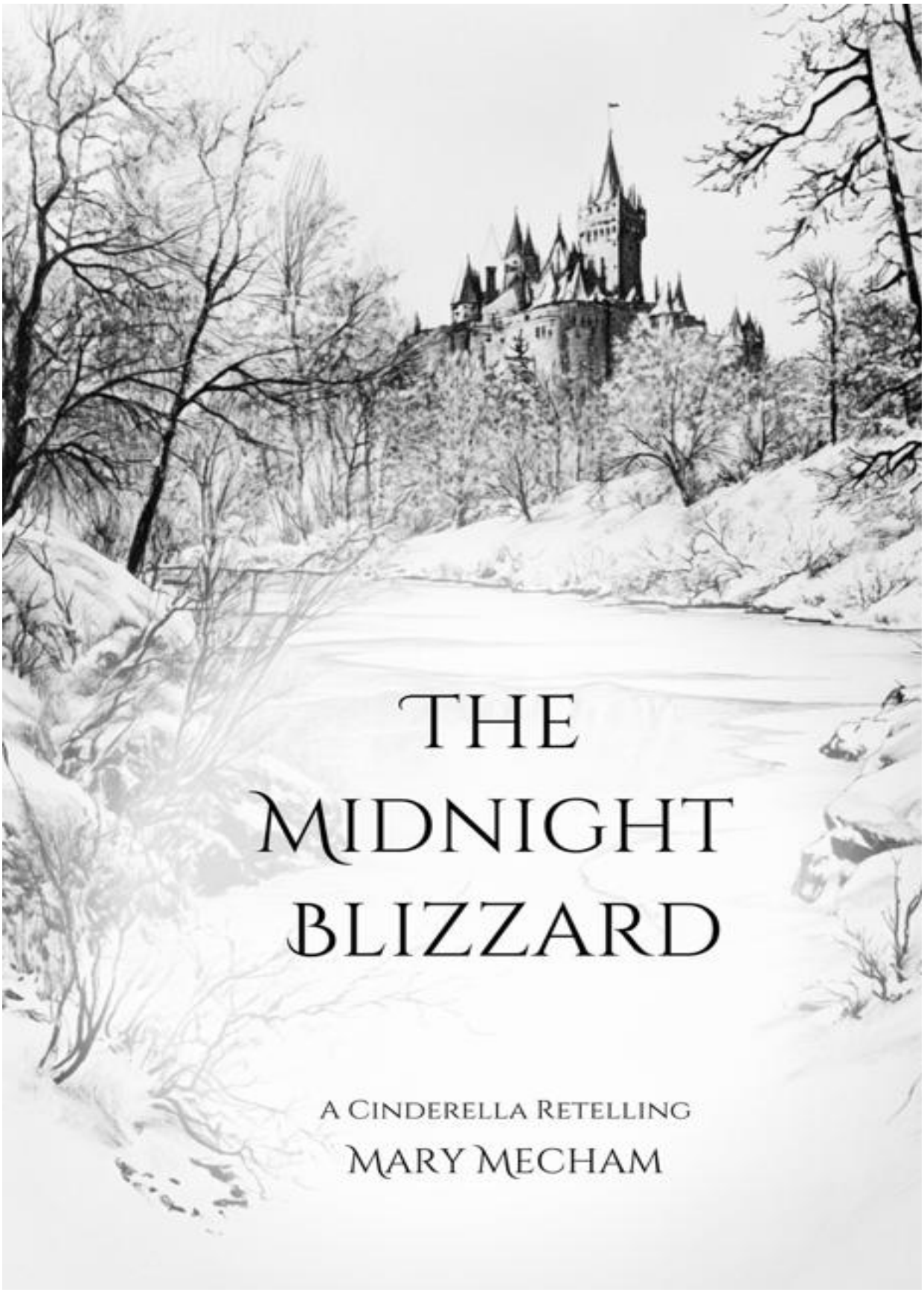

THE MIDNIGHT BLIZZARD

A CINDERELLA RETELLING

MARY MECHAM

Also by Mary Mecham

LEGENDS OF NEVERLAND

Becoming Hook

A Villainous Peter Pan Retelling

Hunting Sirens

A Gender-Flipped Little Mermaid

Betraying Korth

A Villainous Goose Girl Retelling

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Laurel of Locksley

Inspired by "Robin Hood"

THE MIDNIGHT BLIZZARD

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DEDICATION

For every girl who would rather champion a worthy cause than wait for Prince Charming

CHAPTER 1

Stepfamily or not, I won't be cheated by anyone, I thought grimly as I trudged along the frosted forest road. My stepfamily's carriage had long since faded from sight, headed off toward the royal castle. How far it still was, I had no idea. The snow-capped trees hid all else from view, and even on straight stretches, the icy path extended ahead of me as far as I could see. The royal castle seemed like a speck on the faraway hill, so tiny it was easy to lose amongst the slowly falling snowflakes. Kodiak's white fur blended perfectly with the white landscape, and he leapt in and out of the snowbanks, barking at the falling flakes then turning to face me, his tongue lolling out to the side and panting, a silly grin plastered on his face.

"Good dog, Kody," I praised. The second I'd spoken, he dashed off again, leaping through the drifts in great bounds, showering powder all around and swirling the snow on the breeze.

At least one of us was having fun. My father's funeral had barely been a month ago, and it had taken my stepmother, Valencia, less than a day to seize his assets and hide the will that I knew named me heir to his vast estate. Then last week, she had revoked the funding and shut down the school my father and I had founded to educate young mages, who were banned from receiving a normal education. She wasn't the one who had to send the youth back home, tears streaming down their faces as they thought of the

second-class life they would be subjected to without a proper education and equal rights. If Valencia thought she could escape my wrath by whisking her two daughters off to the castle to compete in the prince's bride competition, she was sorely mistaken.

I still couldn't believe how I'd landed myself in this place. I'd been so stupid. When Valencia had invited me to come with them to watch her daughters compete in the bride competition, I'd clambered right into the carriage, determined to use the ride to badger her into reopening the school and discover where she'd hidden the will so I could use the funds to reopen the school myself. I hadn't even packed anything other than a change of clothes, expecting to come back within a day or two. I should have known that Valencia had something else planned when she'd allowed Kodiak to come along without so much as a word of complaint.

When I'd stopped the carriage in the middle of the forest that afternoon to let Kodiak run for a few moments, they had set off again without me. I could still hear her laughter ringing in my ears as the carriage trundled away, moving much too quickly for me to ever catch up on foot.

It wasn't as though I planned to participate in the bride competition. My stepsisters, Vallia and Vanessa, may have harbored desires to marry Prince Stephen and become queen one day, but I simply wanted the inheritance that my father and I had discussed so many times so I could continue his work of helping mages. Many girls shared the same ambitions that my stepsisters did, and had swept ahead of me in sleighs, gaily laughing as each dreamt of a life of ease and luxury. I exhaled through my nose so mist appeared in the air before me. Ease and luxury were worthless if it meant a life devoid of significance. Did they know that? Or did they simply not care?

I scooped a handful of snow, compacted it into a ball, and threw it for Kodiak to chase. He tore after it, leaving a trail of pawprints in the snow behind him, then leapt and snapped his large jaws, crushing the snowball into a flurry of powder. "Good boy!"

I threw another, glad of something to distract me from the frigid cold that numbed my toes and shriveled my lungs. Only the

memories of the injustices dealt by my stepmother rankled me enough to cause a burning heat that kept me warm. The young mages I taught couldn't advocate for themselves, and I refused to let any weather, no matter how cold, deter me from fighting for them.

None of the occasional sleighs stopped to offer me a ride even when I tried to flag them down, and the hem of my dress and cloak became sodden and heavy as they absorbed the snow's moisture. Kodiak put his front paws up on a tree and let out a bark that sent four birds fluttering up from the branches, calling out their protests as they flew away. The castle remained a distant glow as the sun dropped lower in the sky and was eventually lost from view behind the pine trees. Darkness closed in, and no additional sleds came my way.

The bravery fueling my decision to complete the remainder of my journey on my own dwindled and evaporated just as quickly as the temperature dropped. It was easy to be brave in the light. Courage at night in the unfamiliar darkness required far more bravery than false bravado.

Wolves howled loud and long at the full moon overhead. I shivered and drew my cloak's folds closer around myself, my breath forming puffs of white in the icy air. Kodiak growled as his fur stood on end. Many patches of road were so icy that my progress had been slow. As much as I knew my stepfamily disliked me, I was still in shock that they'd left me abandoned on a lonely forest road, exactly halfway between the last village we'd passed and the village that surrounded the castle, risking my exposure to the cold and dangerous nightlife in the forest.

Kodiak drew closer to me, his pointed ears sticking straight up as he became unnaturally quiet, eyes focused on a specific point in the dark forest's tree line. Howls came from behind us, and I whipped around, staring with wide eyes into the nothingness of the forest that stretched its scaly arms toward me, creeping closer and closer. I stooped to pick up a branch from the ground, a poor excuse for a club if we really were attacked. It was nearly a full moon, and the

moon's light reflected off the snow so that if I kept to the road, I had fairly good visibility.

Kodiak braced himself in front of me as two pinpricks of light glowed at the forest's edge. I froze, heart pounding, as the ominous shadows gathered to form a wolf, its fur blending into the grey of the winter forest and eyes glinting with a predatory hunger. A trembling that had nothing to do with the frigid night shook my entire body, and I flexed my hand around the makeshift club. That wolf was enormous; there was no way I could win in a fight against it. I licked my dry lips, hoping that I looked too bony and thin to be worth attacking.

Before I could react, Kodiak lunged forward, his growls filling the air as he raced at the wolf.

"No!" I screamed, darting after my beloved pet, but the flurry of fur and teeth held me back. "Kodiak!" The force of my shout tore at my throat. I watched in terror, considering throwing the branch, but doing so would run the risk of hitting Kodiak as well. My eyes filled with tears and I couldn't draw a single breath as the wild snarling continued. A jingling sounded nearby, but in my panic, I couldn't focus on anything other than my endangered dog.

Both Kodiak and the wolf snapped at each other, each baring its teeth and aiming for the other's throat. I clutched at my face, terrified, as a shout sounded from the road behind me. Ice daggers shot past my face to pelt the wolf, which yelped and disentangled itself from Kodiak, who whimpered and struggled in my direction, leaving a trail of disturbed snow in his wake. More shards of ice in a whirlwind of snow flew around me, barricading me and Kodiak from the wolf and swirling so fast that I couldn't see anything past the wall of white. I buried my face into Kodiak's snow-crusted neck and felt a wet warmth that shouldn't have been there. Blood began to stain the snow around his trembling body. "It's going to be all right, Kody," I told him, my voice shaking just as much as my hands. "You'll be fine."

The wolf's yelps grew fainter. As they faded, so did the swirling snowstorm. I raised my head to find the glow from an illuminated lantern lighting up the rugged features of a young man whose hand

was still outstretched at the retreating wolves, snow exploding from his palm to chase the wolf away. Behind him, a team of sled dogs stood at attention with noses twitching as they all watched the wolf's retreat.

"Are you hurt?" The man stepped toward me. A shock of white hair protruded from beneath his woolen cap that didn't match the youth in his face, and his eyes were a vivid, electric blue. He was a mage.

"No, but my dog is. Please—"

"Let me look." Instantly, the man knelt down and examined Kodiak, parting his fur and pulling medical supplies from the pack he had strapped to his side. With my heart hammering against my ribs, I knelt next to the man, my throat closing off as I watched. If Kodiak died, I would never, ever forgive my stepmother.

There was a large gash down his side, and his fur was matted with blood. I held Kodiak's large head on my lap, stroking his ears and neck while the man worked on him for several minutes, occasionally jogging back to his sled for additional supplies. "You're going to be fine," I told Kodiak again, willing it to be true.

The man's dogs had stopped staring at where the wolf had gone and began playfully barking and snapping at each other. I scratched under Kodiak's chin as the sled owner finished tying off the bandages. "I've stabilized him, but we need to get him seen. Do you live far?"

"At Frostwood Estate in Evergreen. It's almost a day's journey."

"I know a place that's closer. I'm Jack, by the way."

"Noelle." I stuck out my hand to shake his. "I don't know how to thank you." With a suspicious glance at me, he took it, pumping my arm once before quickly letting go and looking away.

I squatted down to try to lift Kodiak into my arms, but the white-haired man beat me to it. "Get in," he told me. "I've got him. He probably weighs more than you do, anyway. What's his name?"

"Kodiak."

The dog sled was low and cramped, but by squeezing next to each other on the seat and laying Kodiak across both of us, we managed to barely fit.

"Mush!" Jack shouted. His yapping dogs instantly went silent and leapt ahead, driving forward in the direction of the castle so we were jolted into movement. I stroked Kodiak's head and stared at the crimson blood staining the bandages as he whimpered. What would happen to him?

"Why were you out so late and all alone?" Jack asked.

"I was trying to get to the castle."

"Off to compete in the prince's bride balls?"

"No. My stepfamily has something of mine, and I intend to get it back."

Jack didn't ask any more probing questions about my motives and within twenty minutes, we swept into a small village. Jack pulled up next to one of the shops. The windows were dark, but Jack slipped out from under Kodiak to pound on the door anyway.

"Beryl! Open up!" Jack returned to the sled, scooped Kodiak into his arms, then continued to pound on the door with his foot, so loudly that I looked around in alarm, wondering if the other townsfolk would wake up and begin throwing things at us. Having made my way to his side, I nervously patted Kodiak's head, and he let out a piteous whimper.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" a man grumbled from inside, heavy footsteps thudding across the floor. The door creaked open, and a bearded man poked his head out. "By holly, Jack, can't this wait until morning?"

"No." Jack lifted Kodiak and nodded at the injury.

The man I assumed was Beryl sighed and opened the door. "It's *always* dogs with you. Bring him inside. I'll stake your team."

While Beryl went to secure Jack's team, Jack laid Kodiak down on a table. Shelving ran from floor to ceiling all around the room, crowded with jars and bottles.

"Beryl's a healer," Jack explained quietly. "I can bind up injuries well enough, but if that wolf had a disease, which is fairly likely…"

"Thank you for everything you've done," I told him. "Truly, I don't know how to repay you."

He shrugged. "No need. I don't like many people, but I do like dogs."

"Likewise." I scratched under Kodiak's chin and he wagged his tail feebly. "Dogs don't talk back or judge."

Jack ran his hand along Kodiak's back. "That's always a nice quality."

"Now how did you convince any girl to stand being in your presence for longer than three seconds?" Beryl had returned, stomping snow from his boots and pulling off his gloves. "You sure you want to be out with this shady mage all alone, miss? You never know what he may do. Or is Jack using his magic to manipulate your mind?"

I bristled, drawing myself up to my fullest, though still short, height. No one, healer or not, should have such a low opinion of mages. "For your information, the law banning mages from interacting one on one with any non-mage was lifted ten years ago, so neither of us were doing anything illegal, and Jack has been a perfect gentleman. Being born a mage was proven to be completely random and not hereditary at all. Mages are just as trustworthy as anyone else, and *furthermore,* there is a proposed bill to—" I broke off, confused as to why both men had begun laughing.

"Calm down, lass, I was only teasing. Jack's an old friend of mine. It's rare to find someone who supports mage rights so vehemently."

Tension drained from my shoulders. While I didn't appreciate being laughed at, it was at least comforting to know that I didn't need to give yet another lecture about mage rights. Kodiak let out another whine, and all three of us clustered around him.

Beryl's brow contracted as he cut the bandage away and examined the injury. "Tell me what happened."

I told the story of the wolf attack, and Beryl listened as he began dabbing dollops of a pale-pink salve onto Kodiak's side. "That will numb it so he doesn't feel anything. Now, why were you out walking alone so late at night on a deserted forest road? Were you hoping to be eaten alive?"

"I was…separated from my stepmother and stepsisters during our journey."

"Where are they?" Beryl asked. "Shall I send for them?"

I let out a hollow, humorless laugh. "No. They were the reason I was left behind."

Jack threw a sharp look my direction. "They abandoned you?"

"Essentially. I think they assumed I would go back home."

"Why didn't you?" Beryl didn't look up from where he was stitching Kodiak's wound.

I didn't answer. I didn't want to admit that my own stubbornness had nearly killed me and my dog, but even if I had tried to backtrack to the previous village, it could have been just as dangerous. To avoid his question, I cast around for a change in topic. "I can pay you back for everything you've done, but I'll need to go back home—"

"No need. Watching a tiny scrap of a girl prepare to fight a fully grown man over the trustworthiness of mages was payment enough."

"You're going to go out of business if you keep giving away your services for free," Jack told him. "I'll ensure you're paid."

"*I* will ensure that you're paid," I said stubbornly. It was well known that mages were already paid poorly, if at all. Whatever Jack did for a living wouldn't earn much, and it was my dog, not his.

Beryl shot a wink at me as he shoved a paste into Kodiak's mouth. "It isn't every day a lovely lady will rush to defend an ugly and grouchy old sorcerer. I'm sure Jack wouldn't mind getting to know you better."

Jack's serious facial expression didn't change. "I can't get to know any woman in that way, Beryl, and you know it. Not all laws are as forward-thinking as Noelle here."

"Laws can be changed."

"Don't you need to tell her about her *dog*?" Jack asked pointedly.

"Not as much as I need to tell her about you," Beryl answered with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, then turned to me. "Your dog here will be fine. He'll need to stay and rest for a day or two, then you can pick him up. But you may want to watch out, there might be *another* sly dog in our midst…"

Jack rolled his eyes. "I think it's time to go. Noelle has business at the castle."

Beryl, finished with Kodiak, leaned back and looked at me. "Oh, that's right. My daughter Peggy was wishing she was old enough to run off to the ball."

"How old is she?" I stroked Kodiak's head. He had lazily closed his eyes, though I wasn't sure if it was to enjoy being petted, from exhaustion, or from the medications Beryl had forced into him. Likely a combination of all three, I decided.

Beryl let out a great, booming laugh. "She's nine. She still has a long way to go before she needs to think about anything like courtship and bride competitions."

"It isn't a *competition*," Jack stated. "It's a week of balls and activities designed to help the prince—"

"Yeah, yeah. You've told me before. But it's a competition and we all know it, even if the royalty pretend otherwise," Beryl replied, rolling his eyes and laughing. "Dangle a wealthy prince as a prize and all the women come flocking. Personally, I think it's a little *wed*-iculous."

"*Wed*-iculous?" I groaned. "That's terrible."

"See, Beryl?" Jack told him triumphantly. "I told you long ago that your puns are terrible. Noelle agrees with me."

"Noelle's off to compete, isn't she? I think she's hoping it will be her *crown*ing achievement." Beryl laughed so hard that he nearly knocked over a rounded bottle on the table. "Oh, come on, Jack. That was hilarious! Are you too serious to ever laugh? Has your ice magic frozen your heart completely?"

"I have a sense of humor," Jack protested.

"And that's *snow* joke," I added, fighting to keep a straight face.

Jack's mouth twisted to hide a smile.

"Oh, you'll laugh at her puns, but not mine? I see how it is." Beryl looked from me to Jack, who was carefully scooping Kodiak into his arms. "How interesting. I'm going to make myself scarce now. I'll see you two in a day or so."

CHAPTER 2

Jack held the door open for me as a blustery wind bit at my exposed fingers and nose. I shivered and drew my cloak around me even tighter, acutely aware of the absence of Kodiak's warm fur. Once outside, I hesitated. Walking away from my dog felt like leaving half of my heart behind. Since Mother's death five years ago, Kodiak had been my constant companion. I hadn't ever realized how isolated I would feel without him. My clothing was slightly stiff in places where streaks of Kodiak's blood had dried during the extended time in Beryl's shop, but as the fabric had been red to begin with, none of the blood was visible.

"So how is it that you're so knowledgeable about mage laws?" Jack's gaze raked my hairline for any trace of white. "You aren't a mage." He busied himself untying his dogs from where they were staked and detangling the harnesses.

Unsure if he expected me to get into his sled or not, I hung back. The castle wasn't far; I would be able to walk the rest of the way by mid-morning if I needed to. Now that Kodiak was stabilized, my reservations about being alone with an unfamiliar man surfaced. Not far down the road, I saw a line of eight bleary-eyed milkmaids traipsing along toward a barn. "My father was one of the ten lords, and he had a special interest in mage rights. He always said that withholding rights from mages was a detriment to society."

Jack turned, the gang line in his gloved hands. “You don’t mean Lord Cedric Frost, do you?”

I nearly stumbled in the snow. “Yes. Did you know him?”

“Very well. We worked together drafting several laws; did he…did he never mention me?”

My eyes bulged. “You’re *that* Jack? I had no idea…Father never mentioned an age, just that he was working with one of the prince’s advisors named Jack. I assumed it was someone much older.” Giddy excitement flooded through me, tingling my fingers and toes. It was as though I was back home in front of the fireplace on those evenings when Father read off the bits of drafted laws to me and articulated how they would help the merchants to have the added support from mages and how they would help businesses grow. “I can’t believe it; you must’ve been working with him for the last ten years, but you can’t be that much older than I am. How could you get the experience?”

The little remainder of Jack’s frosty demeanor melted under my rapt attention. He leaned forward conspiratorially and jerked his eyes up toward where his shock of pure-white hair flopped into his eyes. “I don’t know if you noticed, but I’ve been a mage all my life.”

I laughed, unable to feel the cold as warmth blossomed in my chest. He had known my father and had worked with him on the same issues my father and I had shared a passion for. My stepmother had always put on a grand act of paying attention anytime Father rambled on about mage rights, but inevitably, she would end up penning letters or engrossing herself in a book by the discussion’s end. Other than a few overexaggerated bits of flattery about how my father’s passion for advocating for suppressed populations had caught her eye from the beginning, she never contributed anything substantial to the conversations.

“Cedric said he had a daughter who founded a school for young mages, but I never thought we would meet; my duties require me to stay close to the castle, but I had always wondered…” Jack ran a hand through his hair, displacing the bits of snow that had settled there. I couldn’t tear my eyes off him, desperately curious to know what he had been thinking. “Get in. I’ll take you the rest of the way.”

Any misgivings I may have had about being alone with a strange man vanished on the spot. Jack handed me into the sled and slid down next to me. A peppermint scent lingered about his person, and I found myself drawn to it. Despite it being pitch black and well past midnight with no sign of dawn on the horizon yet, the exhaustion I knew should have come was still held at bay by the excitement of my new discovery.

"Mush!" Jack shouted, and we were off.

"Tell me," I asked eagerly. "How did you manage to get a position as the prince's advisor at such a young age? Father made it sound as though you've been the one proposing the majority of changes on laws about mages to the other nine lords."

"A gross exaggeration," Jack answered in embarrassment. "My mother was the queen's handmaiden and I'm only a little older than the prince, so he and I became friends. The king and queen had already been working on amending laws, and it looked good to have a mage as a member of staff. Cedric was really the mastermind behind all those laws."

"But they ask your opinion with each proposed bill. Father told me."

"Well, I *am* a mage, so I can give an insider's perspective."

I stared at him in awe. Meeting him was so surreal; it was as though one of the characters from my bedtime stories had come to life. Father had talked about Jack so much, but it had always been from a professional point of view. I had passed those tales onto my students, who had all begged for me to tell them again and again, delighted at the idea of a mage who wasn't rejected by society and instead rose to a position of prominence.

"Cedric talked a great deal about you," Jack told me. "He was very proud of all your accomplishments."

"Which all pale in comparison to yours," I protested. "Royal advisor, mage with ice magic, clearly an accomplished dog team handler…"

"Says the woman who founded a school on her own, won multiple ice skating awards at ten years old, and trained dogs for agility competitions when she was twelve. You're the amazing one. I

just have white hair, was born in a convenient location, and made friends with the right people."

I blushed, slightly embarrassed but also secretly pleased by his praise. A fluttering in my chest warmed me; Jack remembered what my father had told him about me. "I didn't found the school on my own. Father helped. It seems that we can both agree that we both think the other is far superior to ourselves?"

Jack flashed a grin that showed off teeth just as white as his hair. "I can agree to that. Haw!"

The team veered to the left, pulling the sled's runners smoothly through the snow. The jingle bells fastened to the sides chimed merrily. Basking in the relief that Kodiak would recover soon, I continued to joke with Jack as we sped toward the castle, traveling much faster than I ever would have on foot, and we pulled into the castle's dog yard just as the sky began shifting from inky black to velvety blue, hinting at dawn. I stole a look at the heavens. It must have taken much longer to patch Kodiak up than I thought.

"Easy, easy," Jack called to the dogs, slowing them until he finally let out a long, "Whoa." The sled skidded to a halt as Jack set the brake.

"Give me a few minutes," Jack said, patting each dog in line, who all had tongues lolling out and panted hard. "Good girl, Shooki. Nice hustle, Nanook."

"What are all their names?" I asked, unable to resist patting their heads as well.

"The lead is Ace, then the swing dogs are Yeti and Shooki. The others are Belinda, Nanook, Cinder, Sierra, and Rocky."

I bent down to help strip off the booties that protected the dogs' paws from becoming too packed with snow.

"You said you needed to come to the castle, but only said that it wasn't for the prince's bride competition. What is it for?"

"Oh, right." In the excitement of meeting Jack, I had all but forgotten my purpose in setting out in such a foolhardy manner. "Before my father passed away, he said that he was going to pass his estate to me so I would be the next lord and also be able to use the funds to continue keeping the school open. But his will and all

his documents vanished the same day he died, and I have reason to suspect my stepmother had a hand in it."

"Do you have any proof? And are you suggesting your stepmother took the will, or that she had a hand in his passing?"

"No, I don't think she's responsible for his passing," I admitted grudgingly. "She wouldn't have done that, even if she doesn't like me, but I also didn't think she would leave me abandoned on a forest road yesterday. Father had been ill for a year before he met Valencia, and he seemed to be getting better. His death was sudden, but the doctors all said it was his illness from before. I don't have any proof that Valencia took the will, either. But why would the documents vanish otherwise? There is no one else who would lay claim to the estate, and she was the one who revoked the funding and had the school closed."

"It does seem suspicious," he agreed. "What did your stepmother say about it?"

"She denied everything. When I questioned her, she broke down crying and asked why I was badgering a newly widowed woman who was still in mourning."

Jack *tsked* quietly. "I can see how that would be effective in deterring prying questions. Did they have a reason for leaving you last night?"

"You have to be nobility to compete, correct? My guess is that if the estate passes to me, my stepmother and stepsisters won't have titles anymore and can't compete. I'm assuming they wanted to ensure that they would be entered."

"But you said you don't care about participating in the balls?"

"No. I heard that the archives keep records of wills and other legal documents and I planned to search them. It's why I was so eager to come with my stepfamily when they said they would be attending."

"*Sometimes* they keep records," Jack clarified with an apologetic shrug. We had finished unharnessing the dogs and unfastening all of their paw coverings. While I stored the booties in the compartment Jack showed me, he wrapped the gang line and tug lines into neat coils and hung them on the wall. "But only when things are

submitted with the proper credentials. It's a legal nightmare to get anything processed in a timely manner, if I'm being completely honest."

"Yes, I know. Father and I had to go through a mountain of paperwork just to get our school's license approved. It rather felt like he and I had to leap through flaming hoops to get the license originally, and now if I can't get it renewed in the next six days, it will expire and the school will be closed permanently, or at least until I start all the paperwork over again. And if that's the case, I have to have a lord's approval for it. If I'm named the next lord in his will, I can approve it myself, but that means I need to find the records." I massaged my temples. "It gives me a headache even thinking about it."

"Ah, yes. About the records room…" Jack took a deep breath. "It's off-limits to all but the most senior of staff here. I can't promise that a copy of Cedric's will would even be here, and with the balls, all the staff are busy. If you intend to press charges, there won't be anyone to help with that until the balls are over."

"How long would you say that will take?"

"A week. There are several balls and a feast, and…" Jack hesitated. "If you aren't participating, you won't be permitted to stay. The head steward has been very strict about that rule. He says he has enough to deal with at the moment."

I bit my lip, staring at three stray hens that had perched themselves up in the rafters, far from the dogs' sharp teeth. My stepmother would easily be able to forge a new will in that time and the deadline to renew the school's license would expire by then. I couldn't afford to wait any longer, and the longer these proceedings were drawn out, the longer my students went without an education. If I only had enough time to search for the records or find someone to talk to about funding… "Can I compete so I can stay, then drop out later?"

Jack held his hand up to his chest in feigned shock. "A damsel who doesn't wish to wed a prince tells his advisor when said advisor is in charge of eliminating contestants?"

I grinned mischievously. “Eliminating innocent young girls? How do you ever expect to improve the public’s perception of mages if you go around killing anyone you dislike?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “You know what I meant.”

“Do I? I did only just meet you last night. For all I know, you could be one of those untrustworthy men that women are always warned about.”

Jack laughed. “I guess I’ve been called far worse. To answer your questions, yes, you can sign up and drop out later. All you have to do is prove that you’re a noblewoman and sign some forms stating that you understand competing does not guarantee marriage to the prince.”

My mouth twitched. “Can contestants be any age? I know plenty of eighty-year-old women who are nobles and very eligible. I’m sensing a lot of flaws already.”

“No eighty-year-old women as far as I know, and the prince does get to choose, you know. I can’t imagine that he would be wildly attracted to any woman four times his age.”

“What sort of tests are in the competition?”

Jack’s white eyebrows jumped up on his forehead. “Oh, and now you expect me to divulge information and give you an unfair advantage over the other girls? You’ll have to rely on more than just your looks if you want to weasel that sort of information out of me.”

“I didn’t realize you had noticed my looks,” I told him with a shifty side glance.

Jack’s pale complexion did nothing to hide the intense flush that burned on his cheeks, which made his electric-blue eyes stand out even more in the early dawn. “Not that I—I mean, I wasn’t…if you think…”

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. I noticed your looks too,” I teased.

“Now see here,” Jack spluttered, hastily backing away from me into his pack of dogs, who all wound between his legs and brushed against his sides. “You can’t just go around saying things like that.”

“I don’t usually listen when someone tells me I can’t do things. There’s nothing wrong with a little harmless flirting.”

"There is when you're flirting with a mage," he answered solemnly. "And it isn't you who would get in trouble for it."

My heart sank as my heady recklessness faded, instantly replaced by regret. I'd been so swept away in the moment that I'd quite forgotten that there were still laws forbidding mages from entering into courtship with non-mages. Of course Jack would be wary of giving any appearances of flirting. He could lose his position or even be imprisoned for such an offense.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I…I didn't think before I spoke."

Jack's jaw tightened. For several minutes, he busied himself with wiping down his sled. I couldn't think of anything to say, nor could I find anything to do besides stand and awkwardly remember my foolish and hasty comments that might have alienated him before our friendship had done anything more than bud. My heart pounded, willing Jack to forgive me. It cast into reflection all the things I took for granted, like the ability to be courted by anyone. At least, I amended in my mind, I could be courted by anyone other than a mage. Jack had no one. Of course, he could court another mage if he could find one, but when mages only accounted for maybe one birth in several hundred, finding a girl his age that he was compatible with was next to impossible. My school was tiny compared to others, with only a dozen mage pupils, and they ranged from five years old to eighteen.

After he finished wiping down his sled and got it propped against the wall, Jack relaxed slightly and the sparkle returned to his eye. "Judging by all your actions from today, I get the impression that not thinking before speaking might be common for you."

"Only judging by my actions? Meaning that my father *never* said I was impulsive? It's like he didn't know me at all."

His smile broadened. "Cedric did mention that a time or two." He finished securing the ropes to hold the sled firmly in place before he turned to me. "You should enter. I'd be willing to help you look into the situation with your father's will, and if you ended up with Prince Stephen, then you wouldn't even need an inheritance. You would be able to open a hundred schools."

"Will you have time to help me? Being an advisor, especially during the balls, must be demanding."

"I'll find the time." Jack's eyes softened as he looked at me. "I did know your father, after all."

"You're doing so much for me; what can I do for you? I don't want you to think of me as a charity case."

His lips pressed into a thin line. "I wouldn't say no if you convinced the king to grant full rights to mages."

"I would do that anyway. I could…I could give you an ice skating lesson or help you with your dogs." I cast around for another idea, my eyes begging him to recognize my attempt at making up for putting him in an uncomfortable situation. Besides, if he didn't accept any help from me after he had saved Kodiak from a wolf attack, gotten him medical care, *and* brought me to the castle, I didn't think I could ever ask for his help again. I already owed him too much.

"I don't think I'd be a particularly graceful ice skater, but I may take you up on the offer as long as you promise not to laugh at me."

"I promise."

"In that case, I accept. Let's get you signed up for this bride competition."

"I thought you said it wasn't a competition."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Forget I called it that. As long as I'm one of the prince's advisors, I'm not allowed to say anything other than 'a week of balls', but"—he shot me a sly grin—"only one girl will make it to the end without being asked to leave. You can decide for yourself if it's a competition or not."

CHAPTER 3

"The Frost family was already registered and assigned rooms yesterday afternoon," the head steward Octavius told me in a bored tone. "There must have been an error on the books; my assistant only wrote two entries instead of three."

"I was delayed in coming and my sisters weren't sure if I would make it or not. I hope it's no trouble," I told him with a dazzling smile, ensuring that my cloak covered my dress. Even if the red fabric hid the majority of Kodiak's bloodstains, it still looked travel worn and dirty.

"We don't have an additional suite for lodging, but there should be an extra bed in your family's rooms." He dipped his quill back into the inkpot and scribbled a note. I couldn't help feeling that he had the look of a rat about him, with a small, pointed nose, ruddy cheeks, and small, beady eyes.

"No problem at all," I lied smoothly, still holding my smile in place. "I'm simply glad to be here."

Octavius stamped his seal next to my name and handed me a sheaf of parchment. "All of the instructions are enclosed. The first ball begins this evening in the largest ballroom. Follow the signposts at sundown. Meals are served in the banquet hall, though breakfast already finished, and you're free to roam the grounds. There will be daytime activities in the various rooms; it's all on the schedule in

your packet. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to myself or any of the other attendants."

Clutching my papers, I retreated to an alcove to think. I needed to be presentable by evening for the first ball, but that meant finding clothing and a place to wash and style my hair. Valencia should have the dress I originally packed if she hadn't already thrown it out, but I would rather burrow into the snow than ask my stepmother for help. I bit my lip. I barely knew Jack, and my pride wouldn't allow me to ask him for anything else anyway.

Deciding that looking for the records room was more important than worrying about my wardrobe, I set out, striding purposefully down corridor after corridor, scanning each open room I passed for signs of scrolls and documents.

"I beg your pardon," I said to a passing servant girl. "Do you know where I could find the records room?"

"I don't know," she answered, boosting her load of laundry in her thin arms. "It's off limits and I'm not a scribe."

The guard I asked reiterated that the records hall was off limits to anyone other than scribes and senior staff, but added warmly that I was welcome to explore the rest of the castle or participate in the activities the staff had planned for the women coming to meet the prince.

"There is even painting," he told me proudly.

"Is there dress-making, by chance?" I asked. "I have an interest in that."

His brow puckered as he thought. "I don't think so. But there is some needlepoint."

"I'll look forward to it," I lied again, then thanked him and continued to search.

There were rooms packed with women painting, sewing, learning new dances, or just sitting and conversing as they waited for the day to pass so the first ball could commence, all clearly too eager for the ball to sleep in. I had no such leisure time. My goal was to find a copy of the will, not socialize, but I did wish I'd thought to ask when exactly the next meal would be served.

In the subsequent hours I spent wandering through the castle, I felt like I managed to memorize a great deal of the layout, from the location of the courtyards all covered in a thick layer of snow to the guest rooms, which all had the same high-pitched chattering within as girls squealed together about the opportunity to vie for the prince's hand. Their enthusiasm was palpable, and I found myself almost wishing that I could share in their energy with a sister or friend. My stepsister Vallia was tolerable sometimes, but any friendship or kindness she showed when we were alone together was inevitably eclipsed by her mother's coldness and her sister's cruelty. Remembering that one of those doors hid all three members of my stepfamily, I quickly turned my feet in the opposite direction and bit back a sigh of frustration.

The records for the entire kingdom had to be contained in a large room or set of rooms. Even if it was off-limits, was it truly that difficult to find? Besides, all I had to do was find a scribe to look for me if I wasn't allowed in. Surely that wouldn't break any rules. By the time the sun reached its peak in the sky, I had already passed the same guard I'd spoken to three times, who was looking increasingly suspicious as to why a woman would be wandering alone through the halls for such an extended period of time, and in a dress and cloak with a damp hem to boot.

As if my thoughts had summoned him into being, a man with the signature scribe's cap perched on his head came into view, sitting on a bench near a window, sunlight streaming onto the sheaf of parchment he was poring over. Eager anticipation gave me a surge of energy that chased away my fatigue and hunger.

"Excuse me!" I approached him, politely waving and smiling broadly.

"Good morning," he answered cautiously. "May I help you?"

"Yes, actually. My father recently passed away, and I think he sent a copy of his will to be stored in the records room. I was wondering if you or another scribe would be able to retrieve it. I'd very much appreciate it."

"I'm afraid I can't help you." The scribe went back to his work. "All matters unrelated to the prince's balls have been postponed until

after he selects a bride unless it is a direct order from the king. You are, of course, welcome to petition to have it extracted from the records room after the conclusion of the balls. It's only a week away."

A week would be too late. "It shouldn't take long, and I need it so I can renew my school's license. Please?"

He gathered up his papers, clearly annoyed at my persistence. "My apologies, but the answer is no, and the records room is restricted to all but scribes and senior staff, all of whom are much too busy this week."

He left, turning down another hall and leaving me in the corridor where sunlight filtered through the window to mock the despair that was creeping in. It seemed that getting a scribe to retrieve something would be more difficult than I thought, but I hadn't come all this way to simply be told *no*. I refused to be a quitter. My students were counting on me.

After exploring all the levels above ground and ignoring the growling of my stomach, I ventured down the steps that led underground. It *had* to be here. There were far fewer people here, but the ones who were looked curiously at me, clearly wondering what a woman attending the balls was doing so far removed from the festivities above, but didn't question me.

Would they report me? I could always feign ignorance or claim that I'd gotten lost. Lit torches burned in brackets as I hurried along a long corridor, my footsteps echoing and sounding unnaturally loud in the empty hallway. A long window to my left showed into a room, and I stopped dead when I saw what was beyond the glass.

This was it.

Rows upon rows of shelves held rolled-up scrolls, and desks had documents stacked in neat piles between corked inkwells, each with a quill laid beside it. I stared hungrily in, searching the tiny cubbies as if expecting to see a banner pointing me to where a copy of Cedric Frost's will would be. He was one of the kingdom's ten lords. It *had* to be important enough to be there.

A glance up and down the corridor confirmed that no one was approaching, so I cupped my hands around my eyes to stare in

again. I couldn't see any scribes, but they easily could have been behind some of the shelves that nearly stretched up to the ceiling. There had to be a way in. I paced along the length of the window and finally turned a corner to discover a door with a plaque that simply read *Records,* on it with smaller lettering under it that said *Restricted*.

With another uneasy look around to confirm my solitude, I quietly tried the handle and found it locked. I jiggled it a little harder, but whatever bolt was securing it in place held fast. For half an hour, I circled the area, trying to find another entrance, but the only other door I found was also locked with the same message.

Footsteps approached, and I left before the incoming person could find me, eager not to be seen lurking near a restricted area. Once I had returned to the ground level, the smells of lunch beckoned me and I followed my nose to the dining hall, satisfied that I had at least discovered *where* the records room was, even if it wasn't open. It was just as well—my stomach's insistent snarling would have given me away if I'd tried to snoop any longer.

Several other girls had meandered in to find a meal as well. Tiny, dainty sandwiches, roasted chestnuts and other such light finger foods were laid out on a long table with bowls of poinsettias and holly between the large silver platters of food. Even though the dining hall was warmed by cheery fireplaces set into every wall, I kept my cloak secured around my shoulders with my hood up, still self-conscious about my inability to freshen up. If I met the prince right now, he wouldn't hesitate to send me away.

I was hungry enough I could have easily managed triple helpings, but my concern over my students occupied my mind so much that I stared at each morsel of food before biting into it. I could still see each of their crestfallen faces as the marshal had ordered them back to their homes. They were counting on me, and I only had six days until our ability to renew our license expired. To make matters worse, in order to renew it and maintain the school, I needed a substantial sum of money. If it did expire, that would mean months to a year of more paperwork, petitioning the courts,

and even more money that I didn't have. Why, why, *why* had Valencia picked the worst time to force the school to close?

A slim, red-headed girl looking even more forlorn than I did sat at the table opposite me and picked at the fruit on her plate without enthusiasm.

"Trista, is that you?"

The girl looked up, then hurriedly gathered her things and came to sit next to me. "Noelle, I didn't expect to see you here."

I pulled off my hood. "Nor I you. Aren't you engaged to the blacksmith's apprentice?"

"Yes—or I was," she answered, her glum expression returning. "My parents insisted that I break it off to come here."

My jaw dropped. "What did Cal say?"

She smiled. "He said to do my best to get sent home quickly so we could get engaged again." After throwing a surreptitious glance over her shoulder she went on, "And I plan to. I shall pick my nose, belch, and scratch my bottom when I meet the prince tonight."

I burst out laughing. "An excellent plan! It's no wonder we're friends."

"I haven't seen you at any ice skating events for ages," Trista said, digging into her fruit with renewed enthusiasm. "What happened? Did you give it up?"

"For the most part, yes. I just don't have the time anymore. I opened a school for mages two years ago, and my father passed away recently."

She dropped her fork and clutched at my hand. "I'm so sorry, Noelle. I had no idea."

The ache that had gnawed at my heart since his death gave a particularly sharp stab. "Thank you. My stepmother kept it very private. I'm sure the king and queen themselves would have come otherwise. They knew Father well."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No, but…actually yes, there is."

"Name it."

"Can I stay in your room and borrow a dress for tonight?"

She nodded, casting a critical eye over the sorry state of my dress and cloak. "Of course, and I can get yours cleaned as well. Where are you staying right now?"

"Nowhere, actually. It's a long story."

I told Trista everything as she finished her meal. She was an excellent listener. She gasped at all the right places in my story of my stepfamily abandoning me, let out a sigh of relief when I regaled her with the tale of how Kodiak and I were rescued, then raised her eyebrows as I described Jack.

"A *young* man, you said?" she asked in amusement.

"Nothing can ever happen between us. He's a mage," I said, internally cringing as I thought of my brief bout of flirting that had caused Jack so much discomfort.

"Too bad. So now you can't be with your stepfamily and you don't have anything to wear?"

"Exactly."

"Then come up to my room so you can choose. We'll make sure you look beautiful for the prince since you can't have the advisor. Who knows? Maybe if you charm him, Prince Stephen will give you the money you need."

"I don't *want* to marry the prince," I told Trista as we left the banquet hall. "And I'm not going to exploit some poor man just for his wealth. Anyway, I only need to find my father's will so I can get the school back up."

"How do you know you wouldn't want to marry him? Have you even met him yet?"

"No," I admitted. "Father never brought me on his work trips, so I've never met anyone in the royal family."

"Keep an open mind, then," Trista said. "My room is in the next hall. My parents insisted on a whole new wardrobe for me since they're hoping I'll marry the prince. You can choose any of the dresses to borrow."

She pulled a key out of her handbag and unlocked the door. "Mama, Papa, I'm back!" she called as she entered the room. "Do you remember my friend Noelle? We used to skate together all the time."

"A pleasure to see you again, Noelle," her mother said graciously, extending her hand, but Trista's father frowned.

"First ice skating competitions and now the prince? You'll beat her this time too, Trista."

"Robert!" her mother scolded, shooting a cold look at her husband. "You're welcome here, Noelle. Never mind him."

"I just came to borrow a dress," I said awkwardly.

"What's wrong with your own wardrobe?" Trista's father asked.

"It was lost on the journey over," Trista lied for me. "I told her she could borrow one of mine for tonight."

Her father continued to scowl but made no additional comments as Trista led me over to the closet. It was large enough for two men to stand in and packed with an array of gowns in a variety of colors. "This one would look good on you," Trista said, pulling out a pale-pink gown. "And it would go better with your hair than it does with mine."

I held it up in the mirror. "Thank you, Trista. I really appreciate it."

After Trista and I got ready and Trista sent my dirty dress and cloak to be laundered, it was nearly time for the first ball to start. Trista's father was still grouchy, and I was more than glad to leave him behind as Trista and I went down to the ballroom.

"So after you finish with your nose-picking and belching and are sent home, will you and Cal get married?"

"That's the plan," she said with a crafty smile. "But don't tell Papa. He was happy enough about the engagement when we first announced because he knows how I feel about Cal, but the allure of his daughter marrying a prince was too tempting to pass up. What are you going to do when you see your stepmother tonight?"

I heaved a sigh. "I don't know. If I confront her immediately and stir up trouble, I'm sure the prince won't keep me around, and I need time to figure out the inheritance situation."

"If you win the prince's heart, I bet he would give you whatever you wanted," Trista said slyly.

"I'm sure he would, but I won't gamble my future on it."

The ballroom was lit with hundreds of lamps, and the chandeliers overhead glittered as the candlelight winked through the crystal, casting the entire dance floor into a soft, sparkling glow. On the stage, the orchestra tuned their instruments, wafting gentle, melodious music over the girls already gathered there. It didn't matter that the prince wasn't due to arrive for another hour; it seemed as though none of the girls could wait any longer.

I looked around for my stepfamily but didn't see them. They might be waiting to make a grand entrance. Vanessa was particularly fond of having every eye on her whenever she entered a room.

"I don't see them," Trista said, also looking around for my stepmother and stepsisters. "How long does it take them to get ready?"

I chuckled. "Hours, actually. My stepmother always spends ages primping in front of the mirror every day."

"What did your father say?"

I shrugged. "He always said she was beautiful and could take as long as she wanted."

"Men," Trista said with a small snort. "Always willing to overlook bad behavior if a woman is attractive enough." Then a stricken expression crossed her face. "I'm so sorry; I didn't mean to speak ill of your father."

"It's fine. I was just glad she made him happy, even if she and I didn't always get along."

Trista nudged me and pointed at the door, where Vallia and Vanessa had just entered the room. They were stunningly beautiful, their gowns were in the latest fashion, and they had spared no effort in getting ready. From the tops of their heads to the bottoms of their pointy-toed shoes, they were perfectly put together. Every strand of hair was neatly in place and their cosmetics had been applied so that their faces were flawless.

"The prince will never look at me now, not compared to them," I heard a girl lament from behind me.

"Of course he will!" Trista smiled at the girl with long, curly brown hair. "What's your name?"

"Jasmine."

"I'm Trista, and this is my friend Noelle. Those are her stepsisters who just came in."

I waited for Valencia to follow my stepsisters, but she never appeared.

"Maybe she wants her girls to look independent without a parent hovering," Trista noted, reading my mind as she stared at the entrance as well. "My father said so, which works well for me. Now I can be as unladylike as possible and Papa will never know." She lowered her voice to Jasmine and told about her plan to sabotage her chances with the prince, which Jasmine found wildly funny.

"Uh-huh," I answered distractedly, still tracking my stepsisters as they moved through the ballroom, gracefully greeting each person they met with smiles plastered onto their faces. At one point, Vanessa's gaze drifted toward my side of the room, and my back stiffened, but she gave no indication she'd noticed me. No one would be able to tell that such beauty hid such a horrible personality, and if I accused her of anything here, I would only appear to be a jealous competitor.

"Do you want to talk to them?" Trista asked quietly.

"Not now," I answered, watching as Vallia laughed at some joke one of the noblemen made. The nobleman looked highly pleased with himself.

For the remainder of the time before the ball officially started, I meandered through the large, crowded ballroom with Trista and Jasmine, actively avoiding my stepsisters. If Vanessa wasn't there, I might have been willing to approach Vallia, but I didn't trust her when her sister was nearby. My stepmother still never appeared, and I wondered if she truly wanted her daughters to simply not have their mother hovering nearby. It was possible, though I'd never known her to pass up an opportunity to rub shoulders with anyone wealthier or more important than herself.

As the orchestra shifted from tuning their instruments and playing warmup melodies to performing rehearsed numbers, the tension in the room became nearly tangible. Several young women quivered with excitement, and many already had beads of perspiration dotting their foreheads.

"Ah, Lady Noelle, you're here. Good, good." The steward, Octavius, was bustling around with a sheaf of papers, ticking marks next to names as he located each of the fifty assembled women. "And Lady Trista and Lady Jasmine, I have you marked here too. I trust you're all settled in well?" His question must have been rhetorical, for he scampered away without waiting for any of us to answer. Even the way he moved reminded me of a rodent. His feet shuffled as he scurried rapidly across the floor, his wide midsection never once slowing him down. The herald picked that moment to give several blasts on his trumpet that immediately silenced everyone.

"Their Royal Majesties," he boomed from the front of the room, "King Wenceslas, Queen Isolde, and their son, Prince Stephen."

The crowd applauded as the royal family entered the room. King Wenceslas's hair was peppered with grey, and though he wasn't a particularly tall man, he had broad shoulders and an expansive chest that had clearly seen many hours training with the military. While Queen Isolde had many more wrinkles than her husband, it looked like they were due to a highly expressive face rather than to her age, and she beamed at each person, waving enthusiastically at many in the crowd. Prince Stephen looked exactly as I imagined a prince would look. He was tall, with his father's broad shoulders, but he had none of his mother's charisma. The expression on his face was serious to the point of being almost bored. I thought, given that he had just entered a ballroom packed with eligible young women all eager to marry him, that he would have shown at least a little enthusiasm. He was handsome enough, I supposed, but I much preferred Jack's roguish looks to Stephen's pristine and starched appearance.

The moment Stephen descended the stairs, he was immediately engulfed in a sea of pastel-colored dresses as girls all vied to be the one he danced with first. I didn't think any of them heard or cared about the next several officials who were being introduced, but I did.

Many names and titles were read off, like the chancellor of the exchequer, treasurer, lord chamberlain, and master-at-arms.

Following them was a long line of advisors, and I kept my eyes peeled until finally…

"Royal advisor Jack," the herald announced simply as the next man walked through the door, giving no additional details. The lack of his last name drew my attention. What *was* his surname?

If it hadn't been for the white hair and electric-blue eyes, I may not have recognized him. Long gone were the heavy snow boots, shabby brown furs and carelessly combed hair. He was dressed in a crisp suit and his hair was neatly parted. Every bit of dirt and dog hair had been scrubbed away so he was left looking like a true royal advisor. My heart beat faster just looking at him. Perhaps a starched appearance wasn't the worst look in the world after all.

Jasmine gasped in shock. "He's a mage," she whispered. "I've never met one before." Across the ballroom, I saw Vanessa give Vallia a pointed look then curl her lips into a flattering smile directed at Jack that unsettled me far more than the glares she always saved for me.

The ball began. Many of the men asked the attending girls to dance, and I spotted Jack at a distant table, making notes on official-looking forms and listening as other advisors came to whisper in his ear after dancing with each woman. One by one, Octavius would seek out the girls and lead them to be introduced to the royal family. Jasmine was one of the first and she gave us a nervous wave as she was led off.

Twice, I was asked to dance by different advisors, and I accepted each time. While I was more comfortable ice skating than dancing, the two shared enough overlap that I was able to perform to an acceptable standard. The advisors made polite inquiries about my family, interests, and hobbies, then when the dance ended, bowed over my hand and went to whisper to Jack. I caught his eye on one of those occasions and resisted the urge to wink. Jack didn't betray the slightest hint of recognition when we made eye contact and lowered his gaze back to his papers. I couldn't help but feel slightly let down. Even though I knew he had to maintain his image, I would have at least liked for him to acknowledge that we'd met before.

Trista waltzed by, intentionally treading on the feet of her partner, who had plastered a polite smile on his face, but occasional winces broke through his stoic expression.

"Lady Noelle, you're next," Octavius rasped. "Follow me and wait to be introduced."

I trailed obediently after the steward as he led me up to the stage where the royal family stood in a receiving line. The queen, first in line, peered at me even before my name was announced. "You're Lord Cedric Frost's daughter, aren't you?"

Taken aback that the queen knew my name, I stammered, "Y-yes, Your Majesty. How…?"

"Oh, I never forget a face," she said with a cheery laugh. "And I can tell you, it has come in quite handy when I have to meet so many people. You look very like your father. I knew him well."

"Thank you."

"His Highness, Prince Stephen," the herald announced, rather loudly considering his proximity.

I curtsied to the prince, who was the spitting image of his father, down to the jet-black hair, dark eyes, and heavyset eyebrows.

"Lady Noelle Frost," the herald announced, reading off his long scroll. "Daughter of the late Lord Cedric Frost."

Prince Stephen bowed with the same somber expression I'd noticed when he'd first entered the room. "I was sorry to hear of your father's recent passing. He will be greatly missed. Please accept my deepest condolences."

"Thank you, Your Highness. He always spoke highly of you."

"I look forward to conversing again." His tone was polite but slightly dismissive, gaze already shifting to the next girl in line.

Determined to stay in the competition until I had my father's will in hand, I asked, "What are your interests, Your Highness?"

Stephen returned his gaze to me, and continued in a rehearsed way, "I enjoy badminton, dancing, and archery. And yourself?"

"Ice skating, teaching, and I have a particular fondness for dogs."

The feeling that the prince was reciting a memorized list of interests disappeared as he nodded appreciatively. "You must meet

my advisor, then." Stephen turned and beckoned to Jack. "He trains dogs."

Jack rose from the table where he'd been sitting and came over. A genuine smile stole over my features and I raised my hand as Jack stretched out his hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Jack. I hear you share my interest in dogs." My stomach swooped when Jack pressed his lips to my knuckles instead of shaking my hand.

Stephen's eyebrows furrowed. "I never told you his name. Have you two already met?" Jack's previous indifferent attitude melted and his electric-blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

I blinked innocently. "He was introduced at the beginning of the evening."

Stephen's expression cleared. "Ah, yes. I'd quite forgotten. You must have an excellent memory just like my mother. It was a pleasure to meet you, Noelle. I look forward to spending more time with you in the future." He also kissed my hand and lifted his gaze to the next woman in line.

After being briefly introduced to King Wenceslas, I walked with Jack back to his table. "You did it," he whispered, shielding his notes from me. "You passed. Just don't tell the others I told you. You aren't supposed to know."

"What is it exactly that I passed, Mr. *This Isn't a Competition*?" I whispered back.

"Ah-ah, I'm not allowed to tell you. That's strictly against the rules. I'll need all of tomorrow to go over the notes for all the women, but you can trust that you will be allowed to stay."

"Sounds like a big job to process all those notes." After glancing around to ensure that no one was near enough to overhear, I lowered my voice. "I found the records room today, but it was locked."

"It always is." He hesitated, then said in a rush, "I'll be reviewing these notes tomorrow in the library, if…if you want to join me. That way we can schedule that ice skating lesson you owe me, and sometimes scribes work in the library. Since the records room is off-limits, you might be able to find something there instead. Books about how inheritances are passed, or…something."

"That sounds wonderful. I'll be there."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Trista, who intentionally stumbled and fell as she went to meet the royal family and picked at something in her teeth right before grasping hands with Prince Stephen, who politely bowed to her. After she left, Stephen discreetly wiped his hand on his handkerchief and tucked it back into his breast pocket.

CHAPTER 4

Trista agreed to let me stay the night on her sofa. Her father grumbled but allowed it. Even so, I felt so unwelcome that I wasted no time in hurrying to the library as soon as I awoke the next morning, eager to leave her father's austere presence.

Jack was already there, poring over long lists of girls' names and consulting his notes from the previous evening, then filling in a chart that had each girl's name on it. To the side of each name were about a dozen columns. Jack was ticking off boxes, I assumed to indicate if each girl had passed that round or been eliminated.

"So, what is it exactly that we were all being judged on?" I asked, sliding in to sit next to him on the bench and glad that we were alone so early in the morning. His white hair seemed oddly out of place in the dark library. Snow swirled against the window, blocking out the sky's weak light. Lit candles adorned the tables, and the flames were reflected in Jack's vividly blue eyes. They were so captivating I couldn't look away.

"I didn't expect you this early," Jack said, scooting over to make room for me at the table. "I assumed everyone would sleep in after the ball."

"Kodiak usually wakes me up early to take him out. I guess I'm used to it, and I'm guessing it's the same for you with your dogs." I twisted my head to examine the chart laid out in front of him. "How did everyone do?"

Jack placed his pale hand over the paper to shield it from view. "I can't tell you."

"You're going to get ink all over your hands."

"There are worse things."

"You are so secretive. Just tell me!"

Jack fidgeted with the paper, slightly embarrassed. "If I tell you, you can't repeat it to anyone. Promise?"

"I promise."

Slowly, Jack raised his hand to reveal the name *Noelle* written in one of the boxes. There was a checkmark on the first column, and when I raised my gaze to look at the column's title, it said *Attractiveness*.

"So, last night was just a beauty pageant?"

"I mean…initial attraction is a key part of any courtship. I knew you would pass easily."

"See here, sir," I teased. "That was a beauty competition for the prince's benefit, not yours."

"I still have eyes. What do you think I was scribbling notes for all evening?"

"I honestly had no idea. So the prince has you assessing each woman based on her beauty?"

"No, not exactly. That was up to the prince and the advisors who were dancing with everyone last night. If Stephen liked someone, he would kiss her hand after being introduced, and he would bow to anyone he wasn't interested in."

The knowledge that I'd been danced with solely so a man could get a close-up look at my physical appearance gave me a slightly uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach. "That's unsettling."

"I know. I didn't particularly enjoy it, but that was what the committee came up with."

"So, who passed me?" I scanned the list of advisors.

"I did."

"I thought you said you couldn't judge."

"But I'm the one with the paper," Jack said wickedly.

"What, so I wasn't supposed to pass?"

"No, that wasn't it," he admitted grudgingly. "The prince kissed your hand and the others recommended you to pass as well. But I would have fought for you to stay if they'd tried to make you leave." After looking around to make sure no one else had entered the library, he went on, "There wouldn't be enough time to look for the will if you left now."

"Thank you. I can't believe how much you've done for me already. When would you be free for that ice skating lesson? I still need to pay you back for helping me. Or do you get the lucky duty of sending girls home?"

"I could try for tonight after the ball," Jack told me. "And I'm not in charge of dismissing the girls who didn't pass. That is Octavius's job today, and I think he quite enjoys it. So, I'll be available late this evening."

"Perfect." A thought popped into my head. "Do you know if my stepsisters Vallia and Vanessa passed?"

He scanned his notes. "Yes, they both did." He grimaced slightly. "I know there is tension between you and them, but the prince and advisors found both of them very attractive."

There was a slight lurch in the area behind my sternum, and I fidgeted with the quill, moodily inserting the tip into the melted candle wax then scraping it off again. "You think so too?" I asked.

"They aren't my type," he told me firmly.

The knot in my abdomen loosened. "How about my friend Trista? She has red hair and wore a green dress. Did she pass?"

Jack winced. "No, she didn't. I'm so sorry."

"She'll be thrilled. She's madly in love with the blacksmith's apprentice and was hoping to be dismissed."

Jack chortled. "That does explain a lot. Both advisors who danced with her said her manners were…lacking."

"Quite on purpose. She's not normally like that." I set the quill back down, wishing I had an excuse to stay longer. "Can I help you with anything?"

"This part only I can do," Jack said, going back to his notes. "But I appreciate the offer."

"I'll feed your dogs for you before I come back here to research, then. I'd take them for a run, but I don't know how to hook up the rigging."

"I'll take them out later, but if you feed them, that would be very helpful." His gaze softened as he looked at me. "I'm glad to have you for a friend."

I loved spending time in the barn feeding and watering Jack's team. His dogs wagged their tails so hard that their entire hindquarters shook, and they wound themselves around my legs, barking and howling their delight at the prospect of their next meal. Seeing them only reminded me that it wasn't long until I would be able to see Kodiak again. It wasn't too far to the village. Even if Jack was busy, I would have been able to walk to Beryl's shop if the day was clear, but snow still swirled outside, piling up on the window panes to obscure the view. If I was caught in a blizzard, I would end up disoriented and freezing to death before I could find shelter. It wasn't worth the risk.

Octavius scurried up to me the moment I re-entered the castle. "Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere for you," he scolded, then handed me a sealed envelope. "You may stay. There is another ball tonight and a feast tomorrow night at sundown."

Beyond me, a very sour-faced girl hauled a trunk across the hall and threw an ugly look at the envelope in my hand. Apparently, rejections had already been handed out.

"Thank you very much," I told Octavius. "I look forward to getting to know the—"

"Yes, yes," Octavius said dismissively. "I'm sure you do. If you'll excuse me…" He bustled off, waddling away to attend to who knew what other business.

I hurried back up to Trista's room only to find her parents packing furiously. Trista helped with a solemn, penitent expression on her face that I didn't believe for a moment.

"I didn't pass to the next round," Trista said, maintaining her somber demeanor.

"So much for a prince. We'll have to settle for a blacksmith's apprentice for a son-in-law," her father grumbled. Trista kept her eyes averted but bit her lip to hide a smile.

"All that wardrobe for nothing," her mother sighed. "But at least Cal is a nice boy and he loves Trista."

"Come on, then," her father grumped, toting some of the bags to the door. "We'll send a footman for the rest."

Trista hung back. "Good luck," she breathed, and with a cautious glance at her father, pressed one of the bags into my hands. "Another dress in case you need it, and your laundered dress came back. It's hanging up in the closet."

"I'll get your dress back to you," I promised, looking down at the gown I'd worn the night before, which I was still wearing.

She waved her hand to brush the matter aside. "Come to my wedding and that will be thanks enough."

"Trista!" her father barked.

"I'm coming!" she called. "Goodbye, Noelle! I'll send an invitation."

"Bye."

I watched her hurry to catch up with her parents. As they disappeared from view, a sudden thought popped into my head. With Trista gone, I would be able to have this room to myself. I busied myself with setting Trista's family's bag outside the door for the footman to collect, but my hope was short-lived.

Octavius came around only a few minutes later, leading a veritable army of housekeepers. "This room next," he ordered, then spotted me. "What are you doing here?"

"I…I thought it would be all right if I used this room since Trista is—"

"No, no, no, no, no," Octavius jabbered. He jabbed a short finger at the ledger in his hands. "I have everything meticulously

organized, and I cannot make exceptions for anyone. You are assigned to the Frost family rooms, and you need to *stay* in the Frost family rooms or it will throw everything off."

"But if no one is using this one…"

Octavius's cheeks slowly inflated. "What do you mean not using it?" he squawked. "We have dignitaries coming! We have rooms that need to be deep cleaned! We have additional—"

"Okay, okay, I'm leaving," I said hurriedly, retrieving my laundered dress and cloak from the closet, clutching the bag Trista had given me, and edging my way around Octavius and the housekeepers. "I'm sorry I asked. I don't want to be a bother."

I wished several someones would bother Octavius, I thought privately. What a nuisance. When I was small, the steward of Frostwood Estate had been a little like Octavius—so intent on following protocol that he was unable to fathom a circumstance in which a person would need an exception to the rules. It was useful at the time; he had always kept things running smoothly. It had never bothered me as a young girl, but now that I was the one needing an exception… I sighed and trudged down the hall, back to the library.

Jack was still there, but he had been joined by several other advisors, all speaking in hushed tones and pointing to different names on the list, shoulder to shoulder. Ironically, Prince Stephen was nowhere in sight. I supposed that there had been too many girls for him to remember anyway, even if he had given signals to the advisors the previous evening, but it amused me nonetheless. If it were me getting married, I would at least want to be present when it came to discussions about my future spouse.

I looked at the towering shelves loaded with books. Jack was right; there had to be something in here about the laws and regulations concerning inheritances. As I browsed the shelves, eagerly searching for anything to aid me on my quest, I pulled tome after heavy tome into my arms, loading up anything that would be remotely helpful. Finally, I barely managed to stagger to an armchair and dropped my load on the table next to it.

After a quick search of the titles, I selected a thick and dull-looking volume on laws related to the lords and the operation of their estates. It was dreadfully tedious, but I resolutely plowed on, searching for any shred of evidence I could use.

"Peculiar reading material for a young woman," one of the scribes noted when he passed by my mountainous stack of books. Though he wore the same cap as the scribe I'd talked to before, this man had a beard and the other hadn't. "Do you have an affinity for legal proceedings?"

"Yes, it fascinates me," I told him, struck by sudden inspiration. "In fact, I have aspirations to be a scribe one day. I've heard that there is a room specifically set aside for them and hoped to get a tour." I smiled winningly but was met with a slight frown.

"My apologies, miss. That's reserved for scribes who have already completed their training. Perhaps one day, though."

"Of course. I shall endeavor to study more to earn the privilege," I told him, smiling to cover my disappointment. A glance at Jack told me that he had overheard. He caught my eye and raised his eyebrows briefly, but then refocused on his work before any of the other advisors could notice our secret exchange.

The hours dragged by as I studied volume after volume all morning, making notes any time I found anything even remotely related to inheritances, but still, discovered nothing substantial. After a brief lunch, I returned to the library to study, but this time, I became drowsy, the constant warmth from the fireplace tugging me closer to sleep the longer I stayed put. The two preceding nights of poor sleep coupled with the monotony of books made my eyes begin to slide over the words without absorbing any of the information. The low voices from the advisors blended into a pleasant hum and combined with the soothing crackle of the fire to lull me away from focusing. Each time I snapped back to attention, it was only to nod off again a few minutes later.

Some time later, I jerked awake as someone loudly cleared their throat, a heavy book open across my chest. A glance out the window told me that the snow had stopped, and the sun's feeble

rays pushed through the clouds just enough for me to determine that it was late afternoon.

"It's unfortunate that *some* of the women don't seem to care about the activities we set up or are too lazy to take part in them," an advisor said in a voice louder than was acceptable for a library.

"Yes," another agreed. "Can you imagine if one of the women slept during the day? She must not have any interest in the prince if she can't even be troubled to demonstrate how she is good for the prince."

Neither looked at me, but their staged conversation compelled me to rise from the chair I'd dozed off in. I looked down at the tome I held to realize that it was out of date; several of the laws listed had been discarded years before, and with how foggy my mind had been from lack of sleep, I hadn't noticed when I picked it up. Frustrated with my oversight, I got up to replace it on the shelf and leave the library in a hurry.

Annoyed that I had to participate in the activities rather than continue my search, I hitched a smile onto my face and went down to where the rooms were packed with women all demonstrating their talents through singing, drawing, and playing musical instruments. I felt absurd toting around the bag Trista had given me with the spare changes of clothing. No one else had anything more than a handbag.

To my dismay, I did indeed see more advisors strolling throughout the rooms, taking notes on what all the women were doing. How was I ever supposed to find time to find the will and advocate for my school to reopen if I needed to fight simply to stay here? What was the point of being where I could find evidence if I was banned from the records room and scolded out of the library by passive aggressive advisors?

I let out a quiet stream of air, resigned to the fact that my time for that day would be eaten up without anything to show for it. At least I had ice skating with Jack to look forward to after the ball.

Determined to perform well enough to stay for another day, I participated in the activities I felt most confident in, taking particular pride in the penmanship, history recitations, and mathematics

demonstrations. All that time of teaching my students was being put to great use. While many of the other girls could sing and dance, few were able to map out Nieva's geography or list the kingdom's major imports and exports. Jasmine, who was strumming a harp nearby, beamed at me.

Vanessa, her face frozen into a cold smile, watched as I explained how bills became laws and enumerated several recent examples of bills and the affect they had on the citizens. At the end of my recitation, the advisors nodded, clearly impressed, while Vanessa shot me a very ugly look. I met her gaze and raised a single eyebrow, silently challenging her to do better. Even if I wasn't an accomplished painter like she was, I felt confident that my knowledge about the kingdom's affairs would be weighted more heavily.

During the meal early in the evening, Vallia showed signs of wanting to come over to talk to me, but Vanessa dragged her away to sit with other girls. I watched them go with a twinge of regret. Vallia and I could easily have been friends if it wasn't for Vanessa.

The majority of the girls rushed through their meal, eager to dash off to get ready, Jasmine included, but I dawdled, listening to the cacophony of cooks shouting above the din of the pots and pans rattling in the kitchens. Where was I supposed to get ready for the ball? I supposed I could try to ask Jasmine, but I didn't know her well yet.

"I'll be right back," I heard Jack's voice coming from the doorway as he entered with other advisors. "I need a drink."

I eagerly straightened and made my way over to the drinks table set in the darkest corner, where Jack met me. "I'm so sorry about what you heard before," he breathed. "I told them to just let you rest."

"I needed to be awake," I said, taking a long time to pour cider into my cup. "I just wish I'd been able to do more research."

"I heard you impressed Trent. He was the one in charge of listening to girls discuss domestic affairs."

"Hopefully that makes up for the bad marks I got for my laziness in the library," I teased.

"Yes, those notes he made about some sleeping girl were accidentally dropped into a fire before I managed to record them," Jack informed me. "It was quite a mystery as to how that happened."

I glowed. I didn't even need to drink my hot cider to feel warmth spreading throughout my chest. "Does that mean you're done for tonight?" I asked him. "It's lucky I had that nap; I'm all ready for ice skating tonight."

Jack's smile faded as he poured himself a drink and cast an eye at the other advisors still milling around in the dining hall's entryway. "Actually, this is taking longer than I expected, and one of the other advisors is ill, so I was asked to fill in for him analyzing the results after the ball."

"You could always feign some food poisoning and sneak off," I suggested wickedly. Now that he was next to me, I found it increasingly difficult to focus on anything else.

"Very tempting." Jack grinned. "But if the prince discovered that I blew off my responsibilities to sneak away with one of the women he might potentially marry, he might be displeased. Especially when"—he gestured at his hair—"it isn't appropriate."

The warmth that had spread through my chest ebbed and faded, and I couldn't resist one more try. "We would just have to be careful not to get caught. And an ice skating lesson is a transaction, not a courtship, so we wouldn't be breaking any laws."

Jack shook his head slowly. "As much as I'd like that, I really can't. Can we postpone until tomorrow night? There's a feast for everyone and we could go after that. I didn't expect this much work today."

"Of course." I worked hard not to let my disappointment show or let worry sneak in that I was pestering Jack and trying to get him to spend time with me instead of attending to his duties. Was he trying to find excuses to avoid me?

"I'll make it up to you," Jack promised in an undertone. "We can get Kodiak tomorrow morning then skate after the feast."

My heart lightened. Maybe he didn't resent me after all. I couldn't be the only one who felt our connection. "That sounds

wonderful."

Jack returned to his companions and I left through another door, still clutching the bag that Trista left me, trying to figure out what to do next. I couldn't spend the night in the library, could I? The scribes or maids would find me and urge me to go back to my room, but I had none. But before I could think about finding an inconspicuous place to sleep, I had to convince Prince Stephen to keep me around for another day.

I wandered back into the vacated area where the activities had been held, hoping to find an empty room to change in. One of the rooms had a display of cosmetics and hair styling tools, but was completely empty other than a very bored lady-in-waiting who sat on a tuft in front of one of the vanities.

"Hello," I greeted her, looking around.

Eagerly, she shot up. "Did you want to get ready for the ball here?"

"Yes, I do. Where is everyone else?"

She shook her head. "Most of the other women wanted to get ready in the privacy of their own rooms. I can teach you some of the latest hairstyles and fashions."

"Please do." I deposited my bag with Trista's borrowed dress on a stand and sat in front of the mirror, deciding that the dress I'd originally arrived in was sufficient for that evening now that it was freshly laundered. "I fear my own cosmetics were damaged on the journey here. I wasn't sure what I could do, so I'm glad you're here."

The lady-in-waiting, whose name was Helena, gossiped away happily as she curled my hair and dabbed rouge onto my cheeks, wondering aloud why other girls would pass up such an opportunity. Shortly before the ball started, Helena put on the finishing touches and shooed me out into the hall to accompany the thirty or so other women still in the competition, all flocking toward the ballroom once more.

I didn't even notice who I was walking behind until she looked over her shoulder. It was Vallia.

"I saw you last night and today," she said, slowing down to walk alongside me.

"Likewise." I wasn't sure what to say. At least Vallia was nicer than Vanessa and my stepmother, but they had a knack for squeezing information out of Vallia so that I didn't trust her ability to keep my confidence.

"I'm glad you're safe," she went on, studying her shoes. "I'm sorry about…before. You know."

"When you left me abandoned in the middle of the forest?"

She flushed. Even embarrassed, she was prettier than almost any other girl, and I found myself hoping vehemently that Jack had been honest in saying that Vallia wasn't his type. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I told them not to, but…"

"I know." Part of me wanted to forgive Vallia, but the memory of nearly being attacked by wolves stayed fresh in my mind.

"Mama means well, you know. You two are actually very similar."

All thoughts of forgiving Vallia vanished. "It's hard to imagine that is the case when she shut down my school and nearly got me killed by a wolf," I said coldly. "I've never behaved so poorly. Excuse me." I left her looking stricken and made my way into the ballroom and over to the refreshment table, where I found only drinks and light, sugary foods.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Vallia trying to force her way through the crowd to me, but Vanessa caught up to her and after one glance my way, Vallia didn't pursue me any longer.

I was so angry with my stepfamily that I barely registered anything that happened at the ball. Prince Stephen did dance with each of us in turn, then advisors and other gentlemen invited us for additional dances. This time, Jack was dancing as well, but the girls he partnered with always kept as much distance between their bodies as possible and only touched him as long as was socially required before hastily letting go.

If only Jack had been one of the advisors to dance with me. As far as I could tell, the advisors were choosing which girls they partnered with, so why wasn't Jack asking me to dance? Was he aware of my growing feelings for him, so he wanted to distance himself for his own job security and safety? Were his feelings different from mine and he didn't want to encourage me? Or was he

perhaps embarrassed by being seen dancing with a woman in a simple dress who didn't even have a place to sleep that night? Suddenly, I wished I'd chosen to wear the fancier gown that Trista left me.

My hunger and fatigue did nothing to force those questions from my mind. With each passing dance, my thoughts spiraled downward until I was grateful for the chiming that signified the end of the ball.

Jack didn't even look at me as he exited the ballroom with the other advisors, but Vallia did whisper a quick, "Good night," as Vanessa dragged her past me, nose stuck into the air. Most of the girls went up to their rooms, kicking off their pointed shoes and carrying them, groaning in relief as their toes were allowed to spread out on the plush rugs.

I hesitated. Where would I go? Everyone else had lodging.

"—if they still have hot cocoa like last night, I won't say no." I overheard a girl chatting with her friend as they passed the staircase leading to the living quarters and headed toward the dining hall instead.

Deciding that my most pressing need was to satiate my snarling stomach, I followed them, eager to find something more substantial than the delicate sweets that had been available during the ball. Though there wasn't anything hearty, I did find a creamy soup in a large tureen decorated with a pair of carved turtle doves.

Other girls were quick to eat and leave, all eager for a good night's rest, but I dallied over my soup as I pondered my predicament. Would I be noticed if I found a corner in the servant's living quarters? At least back home those were communal, but I was sure that the other maids would notice if someone just turned up who wasn't hired.

Perhaps an empty room? If I could just determine which were unused without Octavius realizing what I was up to… But that idea shriveled and died. Guards patrolled the halls and often opened rooms to search the interior. A girl curled up on a settee in an alcove would be instantly noticed. Only the communal rooms, like the ballroom and the chambers where activities were hosted, were

available. Each of the other contestants had a key for their private chambers, and I had nothing.

A blast of snow flurried in as the doors to the side yard blew open. Two girls drinking hot cocoa squealed and ran to avoid the frigid air and I jumped to my feet, reaching the doors at the same time as one of the guards. Together, we closed them firmly against the howling wind outside.

"Sorry about that, miss," the guard apologized. "It isn't even fit for dogs to be out in this foul weather."

"Of course not." I laughed, but the moment he returned to his post, I slurped up the rest of my soup, gathered up my bag, and hurried through the castle toward the courtyard. From there I fought my way to the dog yard, head bowed against the gale and shivering all over. My cloak's warmth was little protection against the bitter cold. As I approached the barn, I could hear the incessant barking and howls so typical of sled dogs.

"Shhh," I shushed them as I shut the door behind me. Each dog had its own stall, similar to horse stables, and the name of each was carved neatly into a wooden plaque. The dogs leapt up and down in their stalls, heads popping repeatedly over their stall doors as they tried to get a good look at the newcomer. "Shhh," I hushed them again. "They'll hear you."

The combined heat from the dogs made the cramped space significantly warmer than the outside, and several blankets hung on the wall. I removed one of them, hung my bag on its hook, and scooped a handful of treats from a sack before turning back to the stalls. The sled dogs sobered only slightly as I fed each of them a treat. Ace in particular looked as though he would start frothing at the mouth if I didn't let him out to run. Only Cinder sat calmly in her pen, wagging her tail politely as her tongue lolled out.

"I pick you," I told her, quietly opening her door to let myself in. The floor was covered with clean straw for bedding. I might smell and look odd tomorrow when I showed up with straw stuck in my hair, but at least I would have another day to search, assuming my dancing or whatever else they'd assessed tonight was deemed passable. The library hadn't yielded any results, so my best bet

would be to find a way into the records room, but how? Even though the women had been told we were free to explore the castle, I was finding that all that meant was free to explore the limited unlocked rooms, which were all filled with other gossiping girls as they did embroidery or drawing. I didn't need a hobby; I needed answers.

Cinder sniffed at me as I lay down in her stall, then curled up next to me, wagging her tail and giving my face a lick. I draped the blanket over both of us, one arm thrown around Cinder as I thought of Kodiak. It wasn't long until I would be able to see him again.

CHAPTER 5

A babble of voices woke me up in the wee hours of the morning. It took a minute for me to regain awareness of where I was and why my arm was looped around a black-and-brown dog as opposed to Kodiak's white fur.

"—cleaned by the time I get back," a familiar voice was saying. A moment later, Jack's face appeared over the side of Cinder's stall. We both froze, staring at each other, and my heart stopped beating as Jack's lungs inflated.

"You know what?" he called over his shoulder. "I changed my mind. Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it today."

"Sir?"

"You heard me," he said with a half-smile. "Take a few hours off and get a little extra rest. I'm sure the prince will have plenty of additional tasks for you to prepare for the feast tonight."

"If…if you're sure…" the out-of-sight servant stammered, sounding as though he could hardly believe his luck.

"I've never been more certain. Go on before I change my mind again." After a few moments during which a noise like a door banging closed was heard, Jack lowered his voice and looked at me again. "Noelle, what are you doing here?"

"Um, hiding…and sleeping."

Jack opened the stall door and patted Cinder on the head as she barked joyfully and leapt up on her master. "I see that. Let me

rephrase: *why* are you here instead of up at the castle?"

"There wasn't any more available lodging, and since I'm in the process of trying to convict my stepmother of the crimes I've accused her of, I think asking to sleep on her couch might be a little odd."

"Why didn't you tell me you needed a place to stay? Where did you sleep before?"

My jaw jutted out defiantly. "I'm not a charity case. And I stayed with my friend Trista before, but she's gone now."

Jack flitted from stall to stall, letting out each dog, and didn't say anything for several minutes as he hooked up his dogs to their harnesses and buckled them to the lines.

"There's a spare servant's room adjoining this barn," he told me. "And it's better heated than in here, I might add. Go rest somewhere that isn't an animal stall. No one will be back there for hours."

I bit my lip. The offer was tempting. "You're certain no one will be in there?"

"Positive. The only servant who ever sleeps there is already up for the day, and he rarely sleeps there anyway. Like I said, it's a spare room."

"If you're sure…"

"Yes. Go get your beaut—go get some rest while I take the dogs on a run. Once Beryl is up, I'll take you to get Kodiak."

"Thank you."

"You're quite welcome." Jack finished hitching the dogs up and jerked his head for me to get onto the sled. "Come on, we'll take you around."

"No one will bother you here," he assured me as he let me in. "But the door locks if it makes you feel better."

The room Jack brought me to was small but cozy. A neatly made bed stood beside a fireplace, and everything appeared perfectly tidy and organized, from the small bookcase to the wardrobe with thick jerkins and furs hanging in straight rows. Judging by the assortment of large fur-lined boots, gloves, and coats, it must have been intended for a groundskeeper needing to warm up and rest if he'd had a particularly long day.

Jack spoke, interrupting my perusal of the orderly room, and I sat my bag down on the bed a little harder than I'd intended. "I'll be back in a few hours to check on you."

He went back to his jumping, yelping dogs, but the second he shouted to them, they all went silent so the only sound was the slight whisk of the sled's runners cutting through the snow. The door's heavy lock gave a satisfying *thunk* as I slid it into place, and my eyes instantly fell on the bed. I'd only gotten a few hours of broken sleep next to Cinder and it was still early morning; the sun hadn't even risen properly yet. A few more hours of sleep was just what I needed before I continued my quest to save my school.

A rapping at the door woke me. I couldn't tell how much time had passed other than by the sunshine streaming through the window, doubly bright from how it reflected off the snow.

"Jack?" I called, still groggy.

"Yes. Let me in!" There was a slight pause, and he added, "Please. If you're decent."

"Why wouldn't I be decent?" I asked with a laugh, rubbing my eyes and tugging the door open. Jack stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him.

"I don't know; I don't have any sisters. How should I know how girls dress when they sleep?"

"Oh, you were thinking about what I was wearing?" I teased, almost lifting my hand to brush snow from Jack's hair before I stopped myself. It was too easy to be casual with him; it already felt like we'd known each other for years. Jack twisted his gloves, and his eyes darted around the room. By holly, I'd said something to make him uncomfortable again. It was too difficult to refrain from flirting with him. Should I apologize again? Act as though it wasn't the flirting that it had been?

He shoved something at me—a napkin folded around a breakfast pastry, which had gone cold in the time it took Jack to bring it to me from the dining hall. "I brought you something to eat," he said, politely ignoring the moment of discomfort. "And I was going to take you to get Kodiak if you'd like to go."

"Yes," I agreed quickly, eager to move the conversation in a direction that didn't involve me making advances that would get Jack into serious trouble. I scarfed down the pastry, pulled on my cloak, and followed Jack to the dog barn, where his team was still hooked up to the sled. "Your team just ran; won't they be tired?"

"Do they look tired to you?" All of his dogs were jumping up and down, howling in excitement as Jack detangled their harnesses. "They always want to run."

Within five minutes, Jack and I swept out of the barn. I tried to burrow my hands into the folds of the lap blanket, but it didn't do much to ward off the cold that stung my eyes and fingers. Even with my cloak wrapped around me, I found it progressively difficult to talk as my shivering increased. It wasn't until I was shaking all over that Jack noticed.

"Noelle! I'm so sorry; you're cold."

"You c-c-can't control th-the weather," I stammered, teeth chattering.

"Here." After shifting the lead line to his left hand, Jack raised his right and bit on the middle finger of his glove, pulling it off his own hand then passing it to me. He did the same thing with his left, never taking his eyes off the road, but managing to strip off both of his gloves.

My fingers slowly closed around them. “W-w-won’t your fingers get c-c-cold?”

As a response, Jack conjured a small flurry of snow in his palm, swirling it around in the air and watching as it was blown away on the wind. “I don’t get cold. One of the many benefits of being a mage whose powers circulate around being able to control ice.” He let the snow float away on the breeze, then pulled his woolen cap off and attempted to one-handedly plunk it onto my head without looking at me.

“But you wear fur coats and woolen caps!”

“I already get stared at and accused enough for just being a mage. I’m not keen on encouraging whispers about me. If mages want to continue to have privileges, we need to blend in.”

“Rights.”

“Excuse me?”

“Rights, not privileges. Mage rights are human rights, and you are just as entitled to them as anyone else.”

Jack grinned at me, glancing away from the road for the briefest second before his eyes snapped back. “You have no idea how good it is to have found someone who I can trust to always be on my side. Whoa!” Jack pulled on the reins to slow us down. The town’s street was fairly empty; it was too cold for anyone to linger outdoors long.

There were already fresh footprints in the snow leading up to Beryl’s door. While Jack staked the team, I looked into the large window of the dress shop next door to Beryl’s. A light-blue gown with ruffles down one side stood displayed in the window, complete with a white fur wrap. If only I had access to any funds at all, I would have bought a dress just like that. I refused to allow myself to think about what Jack would think or say if I wore something like that. It wasn’t fair to let my mind wander in that direction.

“Ready?” Jack said, sparing a single glance at the gown in the window before he nodded at Beryl’s shop. “It sounds as though we may need to rescue Beryl.”

I tore my gaze away and turned to Beryl’s shop, where raised voices could be heard from inside, though the exact words weren’t

clear. When we entered, we discovered a large, beefy woman wrapped in multiple layers of furs standing nose to nose with Beryl, shouting about how a cream he'd given her for wart removal had stained her skin green.

"It's only temporary," Beryl was trying to explain. "Once it fades—"

"You expect me to wait for *this* to fade?" she shouted, snatching at her skirts and hoisting it to expose her trunk-like leg. Her knee had indeed been stained a deep green in all the spots where warts still showed, little raised bumps that coupled with the emerald color to make it look as though she were slowly turning into a frog.

"It will fade in a few days," Beryl insisted. "I promise. I wouldn't prescribe anything that would turn you permanently green, and I did tell you it might before you began treatment."

The woman, with her skirt still yanked up above her knee, took notice of Jack and me standing quietly in the room. "Agh, a mage!" she shrieked, dropping her skirts and flapping one of her fur wraps at Jack as though he were a troublesome fly. "Stay back!"

Jack sighed and though his neck tightened, he didn't move a muscle, even though the woman continued to wave her arms about. Wasn't he even going to defend himself?

"He isn't doing anything," I protested, drawing myself up to my full height and squaring my shoulders.

"He's come to sneak a peek at a woman's legs, no doubt!" the woman accused, glaring daggers at Jack, who remained so still he could have been an ice statue. His piercing blue eyes seemed to look right through her as his face became a model of cold passivity. "Why else would he be here?"

I placed my fists on my hips, feet splayed as I wished I were taller. "He's here at my request," I spat.

"He's a mage," the woman retorted, scorn dripping from her tone.

"And you're being incredibly rude. Shall I hurl insults at you? I can already think of plenty."

Beryl made a noise like a cat hacking up a hairball and ducked out of sight, straightening only after he had composed his face into

an expression of grave solemnity again. The woman's jaw dropped several inches. "Are you going to let a girl and a mage speak like that to me?" she snapped at Beryl. "Have them thrown out this instant!"

"He hasn't done anything that would warrant such treatment," I huffed, taking a step forward. Jack laid a restraining hand on my arm.

The woman's eyes snapped from me to Jack to Beryl, then she let out a great sniff. "I shall take my business elsewhere. See that it teaches you a lesson!" With that, she stormed out, setting the bell to chiming behind her.

A ringing silence fell as the door thudded closed and we watched her struggle through the snow across the street.

"Well, that was highly uncomfortable," Beryl said, his beard twitching. "You really need to stop picking fights, Noelle."

"What was I supposed to do, let her talk about Jack that way?"

Jack wearily shook his head. "I'm used to it."

"You shouldn't have to be!"

A long howl came from the back room and my heart swelled. It was Kodiak.

"Kody?" I called, forgetting the frog-legged woman's rudeness and searching for my dog. There was a frantic scrabbling at the door leading to the house adjoining the shop, accompanied by a young girl's wild giggling.

"Peggy fell in love with your dog," Beryl said, going to let Kodiak in. "He's welcome to visit anytime."

The second the slightest of cracks opened, Kodiak forced his nose through and exploded toward me in a flash of white fur. The enthusiasm of his greeting nearly bowled me over as he leapt up repeatedly, trying to lick my face and quivering with joy. I dropped to my knees, clutching him and burying my face into his neck. It seemed like I hadn't seen him in a month.

Jack knelt next to us, one hand bracing my back so Kodiak wouldn't knock me over, and allowed Kodiak to sniff his hand before patting his head and stroking his back. It took several minutes for Kodiak to unwind enough to finally lie down, still trembling with

happiness, then he rolled over to expose his belly, waiting for us to rub it. As elated as I was that I had my dog back, I couldn't fail to notice that Jack kept his hand on my back, even though Kodiak was calmer, and shockwaves of awareness spread from everywhere Jack touched.

Beryl, it seemed, had noticed as well. He shot a sly wink at Jack. "Things seem to be going very *ice*ly between you two."

I couldn't see Jack's facial expression, but I felt his hand immediately withdraw from my back. "Yes, Kodiak looks much better now," he said crisply. "Thank you for your help."

"I've never seen a dog pine that much for his owner," Beryl told us. "Except for the one time I had to patch up Ace for Jack here." He slapped his friend on the shoulder. "How's it going with…" He jerked his head at me and waggled his eyebrows at Jack.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Jack stated firmly.

"Right." Beryl knowingly tapped his finger to the side of his nose. "And I'm the Queen of Sorana."

I pretended not to notice their exchange. It felt more unfair by the day that Jack and I were unable to have anything more than friendship, even when our connection was undeniable. If it was this obvious to Beryl, who else would suspect?

After thanking Beryl profusely for his help, Jack and I left. Kodiak wouldn't hold still in the sled, so we let him run beside the other dogs. "How late is the feast supposed to run tonight?" I asked Jack.

"It'll be early. We'll have time after for that ice skating lesson if you're still willing."

"Of course. You won't be caught up in work?"

"No. Stephen said specifically that I was to have a break after all the time I put in yesterday."

"That's kind of him."

"He's a kind person. I think you two will get along well." Jack's voice remained calm, but his shoulders grew slightly more rigid. "I recommended that he sit next to you tonight."

"Oh." I should have felt flattered, but I felt only disheartened. Perhaps Jack's feelings for me were not as strong as what I felt for him. Our relationship could only ever be transactional. No wonder he

had spurned my flirtations and refused to dance with me the night before. I thought I had made my intentions clear. "I'm not here to marry Prince Stephen, remember? I just need to find the will and get funding for the school. Once we get back, I'll see if I can ask a different scribe to look. I asked two, but they both said no."

"All of them will say no," Jack warned me. "And in order to stay, you'll need to continually pass each event. They will likely dismiss up to ten girls by tomorrow morning. Stephen likes intelligent humor and archery. You could talk to him about those things."

I kept quiet. My usual talkativeness drained away as I realized the lengths Jack was going to in order to help me grow closer to the prince. Was he hoping I would end up with Stephen? The castle gates opened to allow the team into the dog yard. Kodiak bounded along beside Cinder, his tail wagging madly.

"Here." Jack pulled the dogs to a standstill in front of the small room adjoining the dog barn. "The feast starts in a few hours. You can start getting ready."

"I can help feed the dogs, then I'll go back to the library. It doesn't take me five hours to get ready, you know, and I don't want to waste any time."

"Sounds like a plan to me." As Jack handed me the lines and stepped out of the sled to open the barn doors, a whim popped into my head. "Hike!" I called to the dogs, cutting the line some slack. With a jolt, the dogs leapt forward. Kodiak sprang after us with a joyful bark.

"Hey!" Jack burst out of the barn, but he was too late. The dogs were off in a flash, circling around the perimeter of the yard while I whooped and urged them on.

Jack held his hands out and shouted as his dogs completed a full circle and came, panting, back to where we'd started. "Whoa!" He shook his head at me but was unable to repress the smile tugging at his lips. "You can't be trusted with anything, can you?"

I offered him the lines as he slid in next to me. "Nope. I can't be left alone or I get into trouble."

"You know, I believe you. You're a downright hazard." His fingers tightened around my own as he took the lines.

"I hope you don't give the prince advice on how to talk to women," I joked, lingering a few seconds longer than necessary before I withdrew my hands.

"I give plenty of advice. I just never said it was *good* advice," he quipped.

It didn't take long to put away the dogs and sled. I helped brush the dogs down and hung their paw coverings up to dry as Jack divvied out the food into bowls on the floor.

"You have fur all over you," Jack pointed out, nodding at my dress. I brushed away the hairs as best I could, but some of the fur from grooming the dogs still clung to hard-to-reach spots.

"Can you get the rest?" I asked, turning my back to Jack and pulling my hair over my shoulder.

He did so, but so lightly and hesitantly that I could barely feel him touching me. Would he avoid physical contact as much as possible? It would probably be prudent to do so, but I couldn't rid my mind of images in which Jack had no such reservations, and my heart rate increased until it felt like a hummingbird was trapped within my chest.

"Back at Beryl's shop," I began, eager to say *something*, "how could you just stand there and take everything that woman was saying about you? She was so rude."

"What else can I do? If I say anything back, it only confirms to the world that mages are dangerous. That's what lost mages their rights in the first place; people feared us."

"So you just allow people to slander you? There must be a better way. You're the prince's advisor."

"That doesn't matter when all people see is my white hair. There, I think I got off all the fur." Jack brushed the handful of fur onto the floor to mingle with the straw.

"Father drafted several laws before he passed away; all we need is to find them and secure the rest of the signatures from the other lords so we can get mages more rights. We could even set up an awareness campaign or—" I broke off, wondering why Jack was smiling so brightly when I was getting so worked up. "What?"

"I just love how fiery you get. You aren't even a mage and you care so much."

"Of course I do. It's your life and the lives of my students. I don't understand how people refuse to see that mages are just as human as anyone else, and if that woman even had a shred of decency… stop laughing!"

Jack shook his head, still chuckling. "I can't help it."

"Fine, then. Laugh all you want." I stuck my nose in the air in an exaggerated, dramatic way and adopted the sort of prissy voice my stepmother always had. I took a few prancing steps toward the exit before I dropped the feigned offense and falsely high voice. "Where should I meet you for ice skating tonight?"

"Meet here. It's private enough."

"We're not doing anything wrong by being friends," I reminded him softly. "We shouldn't need to hide."

"I wish everyone saw it that way," he responded. "You saw how one person reacted today just being in the same room as me."

"I should've slapped her. I wanted to."

"I thought you might and was prepared to hold you back if you tried. As much as I appreciate your defensiveness, I'm glad you didn't. She's allowed to be wrong." Jack held my gaze for several long moments. "If you read in the library, I'll look into how the records room is organized and check the schedule of when scribes are in there. I can get that information better than you can. I'll let you know after the feast what I find out."

"Thank you." I stared back at him, wishing desperately that we could be more than just friends.

CHAPTER 6

Satisfied that Jack would make far more headway than I would with the records room, I returned to the library for the rest of the afternoon, but once again was disappointed. Even though I asked every assistant to help and examined every shelf, I was unable to find anything that would help me ascertain the necessary course of action when a deceased lord's estate was being claimed by both his second wife and his daughter. Everything even remotely related to the topic indicated that inheritance of such an estate would be left up to the discretion of the lord in their will and whichever scribe had drafted the will.

Hoping that Jack had better luck, I returned to the spare room to bathe and prepare for the feast. The gown Trista left me was slightly too long but fit well otherwise. It hugged my curves down my torso and hips then flared at the knees, so I felt like some sort of fish or mermaid and was only able to walk in small, halting steps. I leaned closer to the mirror, sweeping a strand of hair back from my face as I did so. The pink in the dress brought out the color of my eyes, even if they weren't as piercing of a blue as Jack's were. Though not all mages had those electric-blue eyes, many did. I hummed as I continued to style my hair. People in town often spoke of mage eyes as unsettling, but I found the vivid coloring incredibly attractive in a mysterious, thrilling way. Why didn't everyone see them that way?

When Jack returned, he stomped the snow from his boots before knocking and entering. His eyes widened when he saw me, exaggerating the shocking blue of his eyes.

"What do you think?" I asked, spinning in a circle as best I could with the dress's tight fit preventing quick movements.

"You look…beautiful." Jack stared for a moment longer, then shook himself out of his trance. "I was coming to tell you that the girls are already gathering in the ballroom to mingle before the feast starts. You can go socialize for a bit."

I pulled a face. "My stepsisters and stepmother will probably be there. I'm not sure what to say to them until I have a record of the will to back up my claim. I may just stay here until the feast starts."

Jack blushed slightly. "And normally, I would agree, but the thing is…I need to get ready too."

My eyebrows knotted together until something clunked into place in my brain. "This isn't a spare room, is it? It's yours."

Jack nodded, staring at the floor.

"I thought you would have a bigger room in the castle since you're an advisor."

"I requested this one to be closer to the dogs," he admitted. "The prince said it didn't make sense either, but I like it."

I was in his personal bedroom. I had taken his bed and privacy. My mouth dropped open and I began stuttering like mad. "I-I-I'm so sorry! I didn't mean…I'll go. This is…this is awkward, and I didn't mean to impose…" I was babbling as I fumbled for the doorknob. "I thought it was just a spare room."

Jack, who looked equally uncomfortable, rushed to answer, "No, I don't want you to feel bad. I just need a few minutes to get ready—"

I felt so silly from embarrassment that I forgot to ask about what he'd found in the records room. Here I had been leisurely getting ready without a care in the world while Jack had been feeling kicked out of his own room. "I'm just going to go bury myself in a snowdrift now," I babbled, red-faced as I hurried out the door. "Enjoy your *suite* room. Like…not the sweet like that you eat. I meant the kind of suite like you stay in… Beryl would think that's funny. Not that I'm

thinking about Beryl, because I'd rather think about someone like—I, you know, never mind. Um, I'll see you tonight! Goodbye!"

The dress threatened to pop a seam at the knees as I shuffled along with absurd, scurrying footsteps. Now I knew why Trista hadn't been sad to part with such a dress. I probably looked like Octavius trying to waddle along. I amused myself with trying to picture Octavius stuffed into a too-tight dress, and the image brought a smile to my face that almost erased the embarrassment of a few moments ago from my mind.

The area outside the dining hall was crowded with women milling around, waiting for the doors to open. Just as I began wondering if I'd manage to avoid my stepfamily after all, Valencia appeared and made a beeline for me.

"Well, well, well," my stepmother tittered. "I see you made it here after all. My girls said they saw you before. You couldn't resist the temptation of wealth and power, could you?"

"I'm here for the will and to ensure that the school can reopen," I told her coldly. "If you thought dropping me off would stop me, you were sorely mistaken. Are you going to hand it over, or should I launch an official investigation?"

Valencia *tsked* softly. "So much hostility. This is a party. You wouldn't want to make yourself unwelcome if you hope to marry the prince. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, you know."

"I don't care about marrying the prince. I'm not power-hungry like you are."

"And yet here you are, demanding a will from a grieving widow to help elevate your position and force children into an institution simply because you've decided you know what is best for them. I'm left to wonder if I'm the power-hungry one."

"Why are you even here? Think you can sneak into a competition for a prince half your age?"

Valencia let out a tinkling laugh. "Such venom. No, I'm planning to meet with Lord Relyn tonight about some important matters that have nothing to do with you. I came to greet him when he arrives as he is my personal guest."

I turned away from her, pushing my way through the crowd as best as I could manage in my tight gown. Valencia followed, lightly stepping on the hem of my gown as she did so.

"Noelle, there you are." Jack had appeared. He inclined his head very slightly to my stepmother. "If you'll excuse us." He led me away from the crowd to the bottom of the grand staircase leading to the suites where the guests were housed. Though latecomers still trotted down the stairs from time to time, it was relatively secluded.

"I didn't mean to kick you out of the room earlier, you know," Jack told me quietly. "And I intend for you to sleep there tonight if we can't find another arrangement. I'll speak to Octavius to make sure you get a private room, but I already moved some of my things to the barn, just in case."

"I'm not going to take your room," I insisted. "I honestly had no idea—it was so clean that I assumed it was just a spare."

"I like to be clean, and I want you there."

I couldn't resist teasing him. "You want me in your room, do you?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Not like *that*. But unless I miss my guess, you need a place to sleep tonight. I know you like dogs, but—"

I crossed my arms and jutted my chin out stubbornly. "I'm not taking your room."

"Yes, you are."

"I'd rather sleep with Cinder again than—"

"You sleep in cinders? Why does that not surprise me?" Vanessa's musical voice grated at my ears as I turned to face my stepsister, who was gliding down the stairs with Vallia beside her.

"You always were useless when it came to fashion sense. That must explain the black," Vanessa went on, looking pointedly at the bodice of my gown. Glancing down, I spotted a few black dog hairs that had somehow managed to cling to the fabric even after I'd done my best to get ready. Had they passed from Jack to me after he dropped his things off in the barn? I brushed them away angrily.

"I think her dress is pretty," Vallia said quietly, almost as if she hoped to remained unheard. After a deep breath, she looked up at

me and went on, “I still have the one you brought that got left in the carriage if you—”

“She didn’t even ask for it,” Vanessa interrupted her. “She clearly has other options and doesn’t want it.”

“Both of you interrupted our conversation,” Jack told my stepsisters coldly. Then, with a slightly vindictive gleam in his eye, he continued, “I’ll be sure to make a note. What poor manners.”

“My apologies for the interruption. I intended to meet you at the last ball but was unable to,” Vallia told Jack. Her blonde hair was similar to mine in shade, but she always kept it glossed and coiled so neatly that she looked like she’d walked out of a painting. She was the one who looked most like her mother, from the sharp, angular features to the full lips and razor thin eyebrows. “My mother and stepfather always had a special interest in mages. What sort of magic can you do?”

Vanessa pursed her lips but refrained from making any additional comments. I had to hand it to her, both she and Vallia looked beautiful. Vanessa might be cruel and have a propensity for distributing snide remarks, but she also knew how to display herself to her best advantage.

“I don’t discuss personal matters with guests,” Jack answered, his eyes ice-cold. “I’m sure you ladies have friends to meet. Shall we, Noelle?” He offered me his arm.

“Cinderelle,” Vanessa said as she pretended to sneeze. Vallia winced but did nothing to correct her sister as they walked away.

“Your stepsisters, I surmise?” Jack asked in a low tone.

“Delights, aren’t they? Thank you for rescuing me.”

“My pleasure.” Jack looked up at a large grandfather clock. “But I do need to meet with the other advisors before the feast begins. I’ll see you soon.”

“You look—” I broke off. There were people around. I couldn’t tell Jack how handsome he looked in public. “You look very busy,” I amended.

Jack smiled softly. “So do you.” He hurried away and slipped through a side door.

"Ladies, ladies, your attention please!" Octavius, standing on a raised dais, repeated himself several times before he was heard. A chorus of shushing rippled through the assembly as women hushed their neighbors until quiet finally fell.

"The Feast of Stephen shall commence shortly. Name cards have been placed…"

I bit my lip to hold back a laugh and lost track of what Octavius was saying. *Feast of Stephen* sounded like the prince would be roasted on a spit instead of being the guest of honor.

"—so be sure to behave accordingly," Octavius finished. "You may proceed."

The doors groaned as they were pulled open, and all the young women glided over the threshold as smoothly as if they were rolling on wheels.

"Good luck, my dears," I overheard Valencia saying to her daughters. "This is your time to shine. I'll tell you later how it goes with Lord Relyn, and I will want to hear all about the feast."

Women flocked around the long table, searching for their name cards. It seemed that Prince Stephen hadn't taken Jack's advice of sitting me next to him. Vallia had that honor, which she looked thrilled about. I, on the other hand, had been placed as far as possible from Stephen, on the opposite end of the table and next to several girls who frowned and complained about the seating arrangements anytime an advisor wasn't near.

Other than feeling the pressing need to make a good impression on Stephen so he would keep me around longer, I wasn't upset at all by the arrangement. Once the girls I sat with got over their immediate disappointment of being so far away from Stephen and ate, they were pleasant to talk to. We chatted about our families, hobbies, and as always happened when people asked about my life, I ended up talking about Kodiak. I gushed about how smart he was, how he had protected me from an enormous wolf on the way here, and how he was the best dog anyone could ever wish for.

Periodically throughout the meal, advisors would pass us and jot notes down after listening to snippets of our conversation. Each time this happened, the girls around me would stiffen, taking extra care

to cut the tiniest portions of food possible and lift them daintily to their mouths.

I kept watching the time, eagerly counting down the minutes until I could take Jack ice skating on the lake. He passed several times, jotting down notes just like the other advisors, but I caught him stealing glances my way anytime he could. At one point, he actively stared at me buttering a roll before heaving a dramatic sigh and shaking his head, scribbling on his pad of paper before walking back down the table again, hiding a smile. If we'd been alone, I would have thrown my napkin at him.

"I wonder what they're all writing," Jasmine said anxiously. She was seated to my right and moodily poked her fork at one of the seven dishes of butter in the center of our table, all shaped like swans gliding across the tablecloth. "The advisors make me so nervous."

"It looks like they're making almost everyone nervous," I agreed, looking down the long table. Vanessa had leaned across the table to place her hand on Stephen's arm, smiling so hard at him that each of her perfectly white, even teeth showed. Vallia, seated beside Stephen, stared at her plate and bit her lip. I wished I could inject some of my own confidence into her so she would stand up to her mother and sister.

"I'll never get a chance to speak with him," the girl seated diagonally from me lamented.

"I'm sure we'll all get an opportunity," I said, and Jasmine nodded. There were still twenty women here. Stephen would have to budget his time meticulously to get to know each of us individually. When dessert was brought out, the girls around me straightened and I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder.

It was Prince Stephen. "Will you walk with me?" he asked politely, then inclined his head to each of the others seated around me. "Please excuse us, ladies."

"Of course." I delicately wiped my mouth with my napkin, then rose and took the arm he proffered. As we walked out of the dining hall, several of the women, Vanessa included, glared at me. Jack, on the other hand, was wholly engrossed in his notes, staring hard at

the same spot on the page without his eyes moving at all. His smile from before had faded.

"One of my advisors recommended that I get to know you better," Stephen said as we stepped into the empty hallway. "And I thought a walk would be a better environment for it as opposed to the feast where everyone is talking at once."

"That's a good plan. It looked like you had about ten women talking to you all at once during the meal."

"Yes, it's been a lot," Stephen said, not quite sighing, but I heard the exhaustion in his voice.

"Women and their emotions can be a lot to handle," I commented lightly. "How are you managing?"

Stephen looked sideways at me. "Well enough."

"Did your advisors tell you to say that, or are you actually doing well?"

A little of Stephen's formality dissolved. "It's a lot of pressure to know that I'm expected to find a woman to marry in such a short period of time."

"I would be concerned for you if you didn't feel pressured in such a situation. A week isn't much time to get to know someone."

"I'm glad to hear someone say so. I think only you and one of my advisors has expressed such a view."

"What are *you* hoping for by the week's end?"

"To find someone I'd like to form a relationship with, but I don't know of anyone who would be ready for marriage to a stranger within seven days. Not intending any offense to you or any of the women here, of course."

"Well then, let's set aside any expectation that others may have for us and simply enjoy this time as two friends on a walk together. Tell me your favorite food and"—I thought for a moment—"a time you got into trouble when you were young."

Stephen brightened. "I can see why Jack recommended you so highly." He went on to tell me his favorite dish and about an experience he had in which he had practiced his jousting in an empty hallway with a spare broomstick and ended up smashing a tall

vase. “My mother and nursemaids scolded me something fierce,” he said with a laugh. “Now tell me about your family.”

“My father passed away recently,” I told him, sobering. “And I’m not on good terms with my stepfamily right now, but Kody is always there for me. He’s my highest priority.”

The prince shot me a curious expression, one of surprise mingled with concern. “How old is Kody?”

“He’s five, but after having him in my life, I can’t picture a single day without him.”

Prince Stephen nodded slowly. “I’m sure he misses you when you’re away.”

My heart warmed. “Oh, he does. He has so much energy. I wish I had more time to play with him in the evenings, but I’m often so tired that I can’t do anything but play catch with him for a few minutes.”

“And yet, I’m sure he appreciates it every time. You’re the most important person in the world to him, after all.”

I smiled. Jack wasn’t the only one who understood the pivotal role dogs played in my life. “Kody lights up every time he sees me walk through the door,” I told him. “He runs to me and is so excited. He’s so intelligent too; I feel like I can tell him anything and he’d understand.”

“I’m sure you teach him as much as possible.” We were nearly back to the dining hall.

“He’s gotten very good at rolling over.”

Stephen laughed. “Young children are so funny with the habits they pick up. He’s lucky to have such an attentive mother; I can tell you love him very much.”

Oh.

Oh dear.

He thought I’d been speaking about a human. My thoughts raced back to everything I’d said so far. Kody could easily be interpreted to mean a human, and when I said that I cared for a five-year-old who I couldn’t picture life without…

“No! No, Your Highness. I didn’t mean—”

The prince took my hand, and my mouth went dry. "I'm glad you have your son, Noelle. Everyone needs someone important in their life. I would love to meet him someday."

"But, but the thing is…"

"Lady Noelle!" Octavius puffed as he jogged up to us. He gave a bow to the prince. "My apologies for interrupting, Your Highness, though if you're planning to walk with another woman tonight, you need to begin now. Besides, Jack said this was of the utmost importance and wouldn't give me a moment's peace about it until I agreed to speak with Lady Noelle immediately."

"No trouble at all. Noelle, I look forward to speaking with you again tomorrow. I'd like to hear more about Kody then." He stooped to kiss my hand and took his leave.

"But you don't understand—" I called after him. Before I could explain, Octavius inflated himself once more.

"Don't talk back to the prince!" he squawked, flapping one of his hands so that he briefly looked more like a chicken than a rodent. "Have you no sense of propriety?"

I neglected to point out that Octavius had committed a similar breach in protocol himself when he'd interrupted the prince.

"Jack insisted that you want to be moved to a private room." Octavius wrinkled his nose, and I couldn't help but imagine whiskers poking out from his cheeks. "I can do so, but not until tomorrow, assuming you're invited to stay an additional day. Until the next round of women leaves, I simply do not have any available lodging." He flipped through the sheaf of parchment he always had with him and added under his breath, "I don't see why it is so difficult for you to simply get along with your family for a few more days, but no, it is *Octavius do this, Octavius change that*. If it weren't for Jack insisting…" He let out a frustrated huff. "If you see me tomorrow, I can see what is available."

"Thank you," I said, wishing I had Jack's meekness and patience in such situations. I wanted to set a cat on Octavius.

CHAPTER 7

Jack howled with laughter and wiped tears of mirth from his eyes as we walked down to the lake. "He thought Kodiak was your son?"

"Don't laugh!" I said, shoving at his shoulder. "I was so embarrassed! What am I going to do now?"

"What did he say when you said that you meant a dog?"

I dragged a hand down my face. "Octavius interrupted us, then Prince Stephen was with other women for the rest of the feast so I couldn't find time to correct him. He thinks I was talking about some cute little boy who misses his mommy!" I swung the ice skates that Jack had given to me. From where he'd unearthed them, I had no idea, but at least I had managed to change out of the overly tight pink gown from Trista back into my original dress. "I just need to find the will quickly so I can go back home and never have the shame of facing him again. Until I correct him, he'll think that I'm a struggling single mother who was widowed at a young age or something. What if he sends me away and I don't have time to find the will?"

"But what if your touching story moved him so much that he picks you?" Jack's roguish smile still played about his lips.

"Ugh, don't wish that on me," I groaned, covering my eyes with a hand. "I have no interest in Stephen. He is very kind, but…there's just no connection between us."

Jack's smile faded slightly. "Maybe on your end. I'm beginning to think that the prince may feel differently. He certainly looked happiest when he came back from his walk with you. I'm sorry I couldn't get Octavius to give you lodging for tonight. I tried my absolute best, but he was insistent that one more night with your stepfamily wouldn't kill you, and I didn't want to tell him that you weren't sleeping there. I already have my room set up for you."

"I can't thank you enough."

A servant came into sight, gathering up firewood, and Jack and I went silent as we passed. Even if it wasn't technically a crime for a non-mage to give an ice skating lesson to a mage, sneaking off together would still look very suspicious to anyone who wasn't aware of our perfectly platonic arrangement. "Jack, what if he thinks I'm leading him on? I can't do that; that must be an imprisonable crime."

"Stephen isn't that cold-hearted," Jack protested. "He wouldn't throw some girl into the dungeon for—"

"For toying with his affections and leading him on even if she has no interest in him?" I stared up at the full moon. "I'm a fraud."

"Do you think he expects any less?"

My expression grew even more horrified. "I don't want him to think so poorly of me!"

"No, you misunderstood me. I only meant…girls have been flocking to him for years, all intent on winning the prince's affection. All of them would happily lead him on if they thought it would advance their own position."

"So I'm just like Vanessa," I groaned. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"Did you ask him about the school or your father's will?"

My shoulders sagged. "No. I was just trying to get to know him a little bit. I worried that if I asked for too much right away he would just send me away, and I still haven't found anything yet."

Jack nodded sagely. "It was probably a wise move. One of Stephen's biggest concerns going into this was that people would come just to take advantage of his power and position." He threw out his hands to balance as he slid over an icy spot then regained his balance. "We're nearly to the lake. But I meant to tell you before,

since the next ball isn't until tomorrow evening, I'll have time in the morning to go over to the records room and help you search."

"I thought it was off-limits."

"Not to me."

Trees coated in a heavy layer of snow stood around the lake. The trail we'd been following sloped down, and Jack turned back to give me a hand as I slid over some of the ice that had formed on the path. Boulders were scattered around, and I brushed the snow off one to sit and do up my skates, cinching the laces tightly. Once they were sufficiently tied, I scooped a large rock from the ground and threw it out onto the lake. It skittered across the surface without any cracks appearing, and my confidence that the ice was thick enough grew.

Jack had fastened his own straps well and stood without any wobble in his stance. Each breath was visible in the crisp night air, and I blew out a puff of air purely for the joy of seeing the steam swirl in front of me.

"Have you ever skated before?" I glided out onto the ice, the familiar scraping sound of pushing off bringing back memories of the hundreds of hours I had spent on the ice with my mother as a child. My blades cut over the ice, and the noise became continual and hypnotic. I hadn't heard it in so long. Mother had always claimed that ice skating sounded like thin fabric tearing, and that the noise made her anxious that her clothing had torn somehow. In contrast, I loved the soft whisper of the ice, the way it sounded almost like it was calling to me. I came to a stop after marking a circle and held my hands out to Jack, inviting him to join me.

"I haven't skated much," Jack answered, accepting my hands and allowing me to pull him onto the ice. With the combination of both our weights, the ice let out an ominous cracking. "How do we know it won't break?"

"We don't," I answered with a small smirk. "But luckily, I know this incredible mage who can control ice and snow, and I'm betting that he would be willing to make the ice thicker if we asked really nicely."

"Oh, so now you're taking advantage of this poor, innocent mage?"

My grin broadened. "Absolutely I am. Do you think he would be willing to help out a girl so destitute that she was reduced to sleeping with Cinder?"

"I suppose." Jack's smile could have lit up the sky as he stooped down and placed his hand against the ice. The opaque, pale blue ice condensed into a thick white, spreading out over the entire lake "There. Now we won't go swimming tonight."

"Good." I tightened my scarf around my throat. "Now, here is how you push off." I modeled the simplest technique then nodded at him. "Your turn."

With a sly sparkle in his eye, Jack followed me then flipped around and skated backward in a circle around me.

"You little liar! You said you didn't have any experience!" I couldn't suppress the delighted smile that made my eyes crinkle into tiny crescent shapes.

"I said I didn't have *much* experience," he corrected me. "But do you really think an ice mage would never have tried skating?"

"But now I still owe you because I can't give you much of a lesson." I watched Jack glide on a single skate, dipping low and executing a complicated spin. Was he trying to show off for me?

"Ah, but I've never had a partner while skating," Jack told me. "No girls were ever willing to skate with a mage, but I have a hunch you might be."

The idea of Jack holding my waist sent butterflies fluttering all around my stomach, and I felt a wave of shyness, an unusual sensation that wasn't altogether unpleasant when it was coupled with the mental image of Jack touching me. "Your hunch is correct. Let's try skating together so I can get a feel for your timing."

We held left hands, and I directed his right hand around my back to grasp the right side of my waist. Our hips brushed as we lined up side by side. "Just don't accidentally pull me in front of you," I instructed him. "I'm sure the ice is thick enough not to break, but it would still hurt a lot."

Skating with Jack felt more natural than with any other man I'd ever skated with before. It was almost as though I knew what he was thinking as we circled the lake. Without me saying anything, I knew when Jack was planning to spin me or switch positions, and I followed his lead, marveling at his natural talent on the ice.

"How was that?" Jack pulled me to a stop in the middle of the lake. The moon's silvery glow cast a reflection on the ice's surface between us and the castle. "Did I pass the first lesson?"

"I can't believe you fooled me into thinking this was your first time. And you must have had a partner before; you are too natural not to have tried."

"I had to attend all of Stephen's dance lessons. I was always given any girl he didn't want to dance with, and skating shares a lot of similarities with dancing. You follow very well."

"Do you think you could lift me?" I asked breathlessly, acutely aware of him holding my hands. My heart was nearly about to explode with giddiness, and the idea of him holding me and being strong enough to support me was almost enough to cause me to swoon.

Jack looked at me for a long time, his astonishingly blue eyes even more pronounced in the night, before he quietly answered, "I think I can manage."

"Try a waist lift first. Hold here"—I pivoted so he was behind me and placed his hands on either side of my waist—"and when we get up to speed, count down when you're ready so I know when to jump."

I placed my hands over his, and felt his fingers flex on my sides, sending thrilling bursts rolling all over my body. Devoutly glad that he was behind me and unable to see my face, I bit my lip. At least we could count this as an ice skating lesson so no one would suspect us of a courtship.

Jack pushed off, and we glided across the lake.

"Three…two…one," Jack counted, and I leapt into the air. Jack kept me suspended for a moment but misjudged the angle when setting me down, and we tumbled down. Trying desperately not to

land on me, Jack did an awkward dive roll over where I fell and spun across the ice.

Laughing, I got back up. "I expected to fall much earlier than that."

"Ow." Jack rolled his arm and held his shoulder as he got up. "I'm going to feel that tomorrow, aren't I?"

"Probably." I felt along his shoulder, but it was so padded with thick layers that I wasn't able to determine anything besides the fact that I was trying to find innocent excuses to touch him, and that he didn't seem to mind.

A loud snapping came from nearby and we broke apart, both with guilty expressions on our faces. A crowned head was bobbing toward us, barely visible behind the snow-covered shrubbery.

"Come on," Jack urged, snatching my hand and pulling me to the lake's edge. We darted for cover, crouching together behind a boulder. Had the newcomer seen us?

Jack peeked over the boulder's top. "It's the king," he breathed. "Don't move."

"Why are we hiding?" I whispered.

Jack grimaced. "Um, I missed an important meeting earlier this morning when we went to get Kodiak."

I grinned wickedly. "So you mean to say that you are already on *thin ice* with him?"

He chuckled. "No, I was just on thin ice with you, remember?"

"Good thing we fixed that."

King Wenceslas passed, calling out to someone. After several moments, there was another crunch of snow, and the servant we'd seen gathering firewood before replied to the king. After a short conversation, their footsteps faded away. Jack and I waited for several more minutes until they were gone. It was difficult to remain quiet; each time Jack and I caught the other's eye, we had to clap our hands up to our mouths to stifle our laughter. Everything seemed funnier with him around. Once we hadn't seen or heard them for a while, Jack touched my back. "Want to try that lift again?"

"Yes, I do."

For an hour, we worked on lifts and holds. Each attempt sent exhilarating bursts of energy through me when Jack touched me, and it became increasingly difficult to disguise my attraction to him as simple ice skating instruction.

Eventually, the temperature dropped so much that even with my increased core temperature from skating, shivers rolled over my body and my teeth began chattering. I stripped off my gloves to examine my hands. The full moon's light illuminated my fingertips, which were slowly turning blue. I blew onto my hands and rubbed them together, trying to warm them up.

"Here," Jack offered, taking my cold hands into his own warm ones. "My skin never gets cold. Ironic, I know."

It was true. His palms radiated so much heat that I wanted to hold on to him forever. My numb fingers tingled as they regained feeling.

"Better?" he asked.

"Not yet." How long would I be able to get away with having him hold my hands?

Jack scrubbed his hands over mine, enfolding them in warmth. His rubbing slowed until we were just holding our hands up, trapped between our chests. If I looked at him, I would be tempted to flirt again, so I continued to stare at our hands.

"Jack?" My voice was so quiet that it was barely audible over the whistling of the wind. "May I ask you something?"

"Mmhmm."

"What happened to your parents?"

Other than a slight stiffening to his fingers, Jack didn't react at all. "Why do you ask?"

"You never talk about them. You said you were raised at the castle, but you've never said anything about them or even what your last name is. Even when you were announced that first night, they just called you Jack."

Jack deflated slightly. "I don't have a surname. My mother passed away in childbirth, and I never knew my father. Apparently, once he saw that his son was a mage, he blamed me for his wife's death and wanted nothing to do with me."

My heart broke into a thousand tiny pieces.

"The king and queen have been very kind," Jack went on, his thumb tracing along the back of my hand. "They tell everyone I'm almost like an adopted son. My mother was the queen's personal handmaiden, so once my mother passed away and my father left, the royal family made special exceptions for me. It's done a lot of good for the mages; we've been granted many more freedoms in the last years."

"Then, you know…" A lump swelled in my throat. "You know what it's like to be an orphan too."

Jack tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Noelle…"

"Do you…" I attempted to swallow the lump in my throat. "Do you ever feel lonely?"

His warm fingers flexed around my cold ones. "More often than you know."

Heat built behind my eyes. Jack knew how I felt. I had refused to talk about my father's death ever since it had happened simply because I had no one to talk to. Jack had not only known my father, but he had lost his parents as well.

"I really miss my dad," I whispered, chin trembling.

"I know," he said, and folded me into a hug. I closed my eyes and burrowed against his side, sighing as I drew comfort from his body heat and shared life experiences. Jack understood me better than anyone. If only he weren't a mage.

CHAPTER 8

I couldn't help looking around nervously the closer Jack and I got to the records room the next morning. Each time we passed a guard, I found myself beaming a little too brightly and nodding a little too vigorously, so eager to avoid detection that I overcompensated and likely aroused more suspicion because of it. How many recognized me from my previous inquiries about the records room? Would they know what I was planning?

The plaque on the wall slowly came into view as we made our way along the long, empty corridor with the enormous window showing the interior of the records hall. I stared through the glass, where shelves upon shelves were loaded with scrolls of parchment. I would finally be able to search for the will. "You're sure you can bring me here?"

"No," Jack said, looking just as nervous as I was as he withdrew a key. He looked over his shoulder and hastily unlocked the door. "But I didn't ask because I have a good idea what the answer will be. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, right? No scribes are scheduled to be here all morning."

With a metallic grinding noise, the lock's bolt slid back, and the door creaked open, allowing a gust of slightly dusty air to swirl out into the hallway. Jack and I piled into the room, quickly shutting the door behind us.

"First you miss your meeting yesterday, then you dodge the king, and now you're sneaking a woman into a forbidden room?" I clicked my tongue. "How did a rogue like you ever manage to become an advisor? And here I was thinking you were all respectable."

Jack spread his arms wide. "The benefits of being an orphaned mage who is friends with a prince. I can get away with a surprising amount so long as I give my opinion on mage-related laws. How else do you think I have time to train my dogs?"

"Oh, I thought that was time you were supposed to be in those important meetings you missed," I joked, looking out the windows at the corridor beyond. I fell silent, then dropped to the ground as footsteps approached. Jack crouched beside me, out of the line of sight if someone were to peer through the window.

The footsteps drew closer, then slowed and paused for a moment outside the window. I saw their flickering shadow cast on the shelving as I plastered myself closer to the wall, praying that we wouldn't be seen. I couldn't even breathe. Was it a guard? A scribe? Someone completely different? After several long moments, the footsteps started up again and faded down the hallway.

"Why are you hiding?" I laughed quietly at Jack. "You're allowed to be in here, remember?"

"I forgot," Jack snickered, then pulled me to my feet. Both of us stared out the window at the hallway.

"What if we're seen?" I couldn't stop my insides from feeling like they were alive with crickets, all crawling or hopping over each other. Each tiny noise from beyond the records room made me whip my head around and stare for the source of the sound. "If anyone looks in that window, they'll know I'm not allowed. Is there a cloth or something we can use to cover it?" I stared around, as if hoping a canvas would leap from the shadowed corners and present itself to me.

"You want to be alone with me, with no risk of interruption?" Jack teased. "How scandalous. A contestant enticing the prince's advisor into a dark, secluded room might start some rumors."

I widened my eyes dramatically and lowered my voice seductively. "What sort of rumors would those be? They can't be any

worse than rumors about an evil mage who enchanted the royal family to elevate his position and status."

"What about a beautiful, unmarried woman being caught alone with said evil mage?"

Jack slowly reached his hand toward me, just above my shoulder, with his eyes locked on mine. Law or no law, I wanted him to kiss me. I adjusted my position slightly so my arms wouldn't get trapped between us and tilted my chin upward slightly. When was the last time I'd chewed a peppermint leaf? Was my breath suitable for kissing?

My hope was smothered as Jack placed his hand on the large glass window instead of at the back of my head. Immediately, tiny ice crystals formed where he touched, growing and intertwining as swirling patterns and elegant, lace-like designs thickened and branched into mesmerizing shapes. The frost crystals evolved from what looked like enormous snowflakes plastered against the window into a thick layer of ice that shielded us from the view of anyone who might walk by.

I placed a fingertip on the ice and glided it across the surface, marveling at how it was cold but not wet. It was like a thick, opaque glass.

"Satisfactory?" Jack asked, then added, "It won't melt."

"Really?" I asked in hushed tones, pressing my entire hand against the ice, testing his claim. "That's amazing."

Jack's hand was still on the conjured ice. "I can make it warm too. Here, keep touching it."

A moment later, the temperature began to elevate until it was pleasant to the touch.

"I don't think this even counts as ice anymore," I said, slowly running my hand over the glass-like surface. "You can't have warm ice."

Jack's hand brushed against my hair and I went stock-still. A wave of heat quickly enveloped my body, warming me even faster than the ice.

My heart palpitated frantically. Anyone would be able to read my mind right then with how poorly I was hiding my feelings. Breathing

normally was impossible; I either forgot how or else would inhale short, tight breaths that did nothing to help me think rationally. We stood so near each other that I could feel his body heat. The fresh peppermint scent that always lingered about him hovered so tantalizingly close I could have tasted it. Forget the ice wall Jack had just conjured; I was going to melt into a puddle myself before long. There was every chance I had steam gushing out of my ears.

Jack's gaze slid over my face, his hand still on the ice, but he didn't lean in any closer, though there was a deep longing in his eyes. Oh icicles, was he waiting for me to make a move? We were quite alone. How far could I lean in before I would be seen as too forward?

As I debated the various options at lightning speed, Jack inclined his head a fraction of an inch so our noses nearly brushed. Eagerly, I began to rise to my tiptoes, but—

"Didn't we come here to look for your father's will?" Jack's voice was quiet but firm.

The spell between us broke. Trying valiantly to act as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, I bobbed my head up and down. "Of course," I said in a rush, trying to sink back down onto my heels and distance my face from Jack's while hoping that my secret desire hadn't been too obvious, though I knew it had been. "I was just trying to think of where…where to start."

He cleared his throat. "I suggest in recent legal forms." Jack gestured toward a part of the wall, where hundreds of scrolls were rolled tightly and forced into tiny cubby holes. "I didn't find it in the incoming documents yesterday when I looked, so it must have already been processed. If the scribes are doing their jobs correctly, they should all be labeled."

It seemed that only a portion of the scribes did their jobs correctly. Some scrolls were neatly labeled and organized, while others had been carelessly rolled and shoved into any open spot, with either a sloppily scrawled label or none at all, and a few were in the incorrect cubby.

I opened scroll after scroll, scanning each for the name then re-rolling it tightly to replace it exactly where I'd found it. Behind me, I

heard Jack shifting papers around as well, but the silence stretched long between us, crackling with unspoken tension.

Questions raced around my mind, each confusing me more than the last. Jack had to feel something for me or he wouldn't be helping me as much as he had already done. If he did, was it purely dedication to following the law that held him back, or were my feelings different from his? Did he even know how strong my feelings were becoming, or did he merely think my flirtations were a passing fancy? But even if I was able to convince him I was sincere, it would still endanger his position if we were found out.

Though I was finally in the records hall, the place I'd longed to infiltrate even before arriving at the castle, I couldn't focus properly. I stared hard at an unfurled scroll, trying to bully my brain into reading the words scribbled there in faded ink, but a haze fogged my vision, clearing only when I glanced over my shoulder at Jack. He was far too distracting for my good.

We continued searching for the entire morning, scouring each document from the last five years, and finally, we located a tiny cubby that was labeled *Lord Cedric Frost*, but it was empty. Frantically, I pulled out all the scrolls from the surrounding cubbies, hoping it had simply been incorrectly filed, but there was nothing. I wanted to cry from the frustration of it. I *knew* he had a will, and he had to have sent something, otherwise there wouldn't be a cubby labeled with his name. He had shown the will to me two years ago. If I couldn't find it by the time the school's license expired in three days, I didn't know what I would do.

"The scribes will be here soon," Jack warned me. "I'll need to take down the ice." He moved over to the window, placing his hand against it once more while I quickly refiled everything I'd taken out, glaring at the empty slot where the will should have been. Jack reversed his ice formation process. The ice crystals shrank and returned to his hand until the transparent glass was all that was left.

"I didn't find anything," I told him, disappointment gnawing at me as I ran my fingers over the empty shelf.

"What will happen once you do?" Jack stared at the empty cubby hole.

"I'll call the authorities and force my stepmother to turn over the inheritance so I can reopen the school."

"And then?" Jack made his way over to the back exit.

"Then I'll teach at the school. If I'm the heiress of the Frostwood estate, I'll be able to teach at the manor instead of in the tiny one-room schoolhouse."

We left the records room, looking around anxiously as Jack locked the door again before we hurried away. For several minutes, we walked in silence, each lost in our own thoughts.

"What if you stayed here?" Jack asked quietly.

I wasn't sure what to say. "Then the children I teach would need room and boarding too. They don't have anywhere else to go to learn."

"What if I convinced the king and queen to open a school for mages? I could help teach."

I closed my eyes. It was too tantalizing a dream to have dangled in front of me. Just being around Jack for a few days was enough to drive me mad. If I was around him constantly without being able to truly be with him, it would be sheer torture.

"If it was possible, I would love that. But until I find the will…"

"I know. It was just a thought. If you could convince Stephen to allow it…then we could at least see each other sometimes."

"I don't know if I would be content with that," I admitted quietly, my footsteps halting in a shadowy corridor. A gentle snow drifted down to collect on the windowpanes outside. There was a hush in the castle that I wished would remain absolute. If only Jack and I could speak freely without the risk of anyone overhearing.

Jack's jaw tensed. "Nor I. But there's nothing else we can do about that."

Knowing that he felt similarly was going to drive me insane if we couldn't be together. "We wouldn't have to tell anyone." I knew it was indecent and forbidden, but if I had to continue to pretend as though I didn't have feelings for Jack, it would eat me alive. "We could keep it secret."

"Secrets are always discovered in the end," Jack said sadly. "It would only be a matter of time before we were discovered."

"I know," I sighed. Then I perked up. If secrets couldn't be kept hidden indefinitely, and my stepmother hadn't given anything to the scribes for safekeeping… "Do you think my stepmother is keeping the will in her room?"

Jack's eyes flicked up to stare at the ceiling as he considered. "I would, if it were me."

"If only we had a way to get in there to find out."

"We could. It depends on how many rules you're willing to break," Jack said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

I shot him a look. "The roguish mage encourages a refined lady to compromise her ethics and engage in acts of burglary? Was my father aware of your flexible ethics?"

"Oh no, I always had to be dignified and proper around him. And it wouldn't be burglary, exactly. I call it…reclaiming stolen property, and technically, you're still supposed to be sleeping there anyway. It's in Octavius's records."

"Yes, that sounds much better."

"I have a master key."

My mouth hung open. "Are you serious about this?"

"I don't see any alternative, do you?"

I thought, but no solution came to mind.

Jack shot me a conspiratorial look. "We've already bent a few rules already. What's one more?"

CHAPTER 9

According to Jack, in lieu of another ball, the prince had planned to take walks with each of the fifteen women still remaining after the feast. As I had already walked with Stephen and received a letter requesting I stay longer, I wasn't required to present myself in the ballroom that afternoon and evening while Stephen took each of the ladies for a stroll. When Jack and I stopped by the ballroom, I saw that Jasmine had been sent home, but my stepfamily was still there. My stepsisters were facing the door to ensure they were easily visible, and my stepmother sat in the shadows beside them, her back to the door and whispering in a low hiss to them. They took no notice of Jack as he strode toward the prince, nor of me, staring in from the crack in the doorway so I wouldn't be spotted. For several minutes, Jack and Prince Stephen spoke in low whispers and stole glances at my stepfamily, who all sat rigidly straight with painfully wide smiles, fully aware of the scrutiny they were under.

"He agreed to have them go last and introduce them to his mother," Jack muttered when he finally emerged again. "But they aren't announcing the order. That should keep them busy for a while."

Each step felt increasingly dangerous as Jack and I crept toward my stepfamily's suite of rooms, and I wondered how guards didn't come running just from the sound of my pounding heart.

"We aren't doing anything wrong by walking down the hall," Jack pointed out in a whisper, but he kept his footsteps light as well.

"We're not doing anything wrong *yet*," I corrected him. We'd been over the plan several times already, but my hands still shook. I swallowed, but my mouth remained as dry as chalk.

"Keep watch," Jack murmured, withdrawing a key from his pocket. "If anyone sees us sneaking into the room…"

Each flutter of the hallway curtains and each flurry of the snow outside drew my gaze as I scanned the corridor for any movement. After a few seconds, there was a click of the bolt being slid back, and the door swung open.

I ducked inside, elated with our success. Jack followed, hurriedly closing the door as gently as possible. "Lock it again," I reminded him. "If any guards come by—"

"The guards don't go jiggling the door handles of guests," Jack laughed, but locked the door anyway. "They aren't robbers."

"No, but we will be soon if I can just find…" I began searching the room, careful to replace each item precisely how I found it as I searched the places I thought were most likely to hide an important document.

The amount of luggage my two stepsisters and stepmother had brought filled every nook and cranny of their expansive suite and could have hidden a library's worth of documents. But no, my stepfamily's vanity was evident as I sifted through their multiple trunks. There were cosmetics, dresses, hats, accessories, shoes, corsets, and several items neither Jack or I were able to identify, including a stretchy, skin-colored material that felt slightly more supple than a rubber boot heel.

"Any idea what this is?" I asked, holding it up and stretching it out experimentally.

He rolled his eyes. "You're asking a man who has no experience with anything related to women or fashion. If you don't know, how should I?" His head tilted as he studied the mysterious object. "If it's used to stuff into their bodices to accentuate their curves, I may vomit. I'm not touching that."

I burst out laughing, then quickly clapped a hand over my mouth to muffle my voice. “Don’t make me laugh like that,” I hissed at him. “This is a secret mission.”

“Then maybe you should act more secretive,” he said as I put the unidentified object back where I’d found it. “You need to be looking for the will, not—” He broke off, suddenly on high alert as the sound of a key sliding into a lock came from the door.

Eyes wide with panic, I grabbed the front of Jack’s tunic and whirled him into the closet, folding myself in after him and pulling the door nearly closed just as the door to the hallway opened. I stared through the tiny crack, almost forgetting to breathe as my stepmother slowly came into view, setting down the enormous handbag she always carried with her as she made her way across to the opposite side of the room.

The handbag.

I stared at it. It was large enough to conceal several documents, and it would make sense that she would never leave it unattended if that was her hiding place. But why would she be back so early?

My question was answered as I saw my stepmother cross to the vanity and sit down with a slight grunt. There followed multiple clicks and snaps of small containers being opened and closed as Valencia touched up her makeup. Of course; how could I be so stupid as to forget my stepmother’s midday practice of obsessing over her looks? Heaven forbid she have a single hair out of place at any moment. Jack and I wouldn’t be able to leave or make any noise at all for however long it took until she deemed herself perfect once more.

Silently, I pivoted away from the door and realized that the closet I’d thrown us into was the equivalent of a tiny broom cupboard. Jack had attempted to give me as much space as possible, but was still pressed against me, arm up above my head on the closet’s wall as he tried to avoid knocking anything off the shelves.

By holly, we were going to be stuck like this for at least half an hour while my stepmother went through her extensive skincare and cosmetics application process. The narrow sliver of light from the cracked door fell across my face and lit up the closet just enough

that I was able to see Jack's facial expressions, much easier to pick out because of his pale features. I slowly lifted my finger to my lips then pointed toward my stepmother.

He mouthed, *How long*?

I shrugged. It was very difficult to find the motivation to pull my attention away from reading Jack's lips. *She's doing her makeup*, I mouthed, pleased when Jack's gaze dropped to study my mouth. I had to mouth the words several times before he understood, and I found myself watching his lips, trying valiantly to appear as though I was simply waiting for him to respond. But the moments stretched into minutes and neither of us looked away.

The closet was warming up unnaturally quickly considering that it was snowing outside. Jack always felt warm, but he could have rivaled a furnace for the waves of heat he gave off and I struggled to remember that he was a mage with ice magic. I hoped the dim interior of the closet hid the redness that I was certain was rising to color my cheeks.

Jack's throat convulsed as he swallowed, still looking down at me and standing so close that it was impossible not to touch him. My fingers curled around the front of his jerkin, scrunching the fabric into my palms. A gentle touch brushed against my side as Jack's hand crept up to trail along my waist, fidgeting with the seam on my dress with light, hesitant touches. It left me desperately wanting more, unable to restrain myself as I lifted my hand to run my fingers up his chest and around to the back of his neck. Staying away from him demanded an inner fortitude I wasn't sure I possessed. His thumb raised to caress my jaw, our mouths mere inches apart. I closed my eyes, certain that I would be able to live forever on the ecstasy of this moment alone.

My stepmother continued to clatter her numerous powders and creams around on the table, and with each noise, my breathing grew lighter and more rapid. In contrast, Jack didn't seem to be breathing at all. Mages were still human; they had to breathe, even if they weren't allowed to get married to non-mages.

My stomach jolted and my eyes shot open. The stark realization of the indecency of our situation hit me with the force of an

avalanche. Mages were still banned from courting non-mages; it was *illegal.* If we were discovered in such a compromising situation, it would mean the end of Jack's career, and I would be responsible. Why had I endangered his job in such a careless manner? And the prince would certainly not care to hear that one of the women he was seeing was wrapped around his advisor. I would be thrown out of the competition and sent away from the castle, unable to discover if my stepmother had truly stolen my inheritance and unable to plead my school's case to the king.

Even with all of the reasons we shouldn't be together, and with all of the reasons I should be horrified by our current situation, the forbidden nature of being with Jack only served to make him even more desirable. Blood pounded in my ears as my breathing mingled with his.

My right leg went numb from being in an awkward position for so long, but I dared not move a muscle. If Valencia discovered us…

Jack dropped his head slightly closer, the tip of his nose brushing against mine, but we mustn't kiss. We mustn't. Any unusual sound would alert my stepmother to our hiding spot, and kisses often made noise. Was it worth it to attempt a silent kiss?

A mental image of my stepmother wrenching open the closet doors to discover us locked in a passionate embrace was motivation enough to hold me back, but only barely. It wasn't just our embarrassment at stake. Both of our futures would be in jeopardy if we were found. Would the prince and his parents have Jack imprisoned, or would his years as an advisor be enough to keep him out of a cell?

There was a screech as my stepmother pushed the stool back to stand, finally done with fixing her face to hide her years. There were a few additional clattering noises as she adjusted her makeup brushes, then the sound of her voice nearly made me jump out of my skin.

"You're too kind, Your Majesty. I think our children will get along splendidly. How fortunate that they found each other." Her simpering tone elicited an instant image of her cooing at her reflection, batting

her overly long eyelashes and twirling a coil of her eternally perfect curls.

Jack raised his eyebrows at me, listening as my stepmother continued in a fawning voice, "Oh, either of my girls would be the perfect choice for Prince Stephen. He's such a handsome young man."

She hummed to herself as she picked up her bag. My legs had long since gone to sleep, and when Jack took advantage of the sounds of my stepmother's footsteps to adjust his position slightly, one of the coats fell off its hanger and to the floor. The noise was faint, but there. Jack and I stared at each other, horrified, and my heart forgot to beat.

Valencia's footsteps halted. From the crack between the door and its frame, I could barely make out my stepmother's profile as she stared around the room, listening for any additional sounds. Each second felt like an eternity.

Finally, Valencia gave a slight shrug, hoisted her handbag a little higher on her shoulder, and moved beyond the narrow range of my vision. A few seconds later, I heard the door open and close, followed by a key scraping in the lock. Retreating footsteps clicked away down the distant hall.

Jack let out a long stream of air that swirled around my neck, wafting his sweet peppermint scent over me. "That was close," he whispered. "She's gone now. We can get out."

I made no effort to move. "She might come back. And my legs are numb."

"Mine are too." Jack didn't move either.

"We'll get that sharp-needle, prickly feeling once we move again." I couldn't let go of Jack, I just couldn't. Now that my stepmother was gone, it was much too tempting to stay put with Jack, far closer than we would be allowed in public. Was it so wrong to find a few excuses to stay where I could forget the world and be happy for just a few moments?

I tilted my chin upward, inviting Jack to do what I knew we were both thinking about. The danger had passed now that my stepmother had left. If there were a few slight noises, no one would

be around to hear it. Jack didn't lean forward, but I saw the yearning in his eyes. Could I be bold enough for the both of us?

Examining his face, I decided I could be. Inhaling deeply, I began to close the last tantalizing inch hovering between our faces, but Jack pulled back.

"We can't," he breathed.

"No one would know."

"But it can't last. I don't want a taste of something I'll never be able to keep." His voice was thick and husky, and the injustice of our situation beat against my heart once more, battering it so effectively that it felt bruised.

Suddenly angry at the world, I stumbled out of the closet, avoiding Jack's eye. While I hadn't been able to stop staring at him while closeted together, the keen sense of loss and letdown I now felt wouldn't allow me to look his way. Jack's reasons were good, but selfishly, I wanted a kiss to remember him by. Even more selfishly, I wanted to ensure that he would never forget me. The phantom pinpricks began as blood flow returned to my extremities and I focused on the sensation, gritting my teeth against the uncomfortable feeling.

"It goes away faster if you walk it off," Jack told me.

"I know." I strode around the room, trying to think of something to say, but came up with nothing. Our search of my stepmother's room had yielded no results, just as the search of the records room and library had been in vain. I bit my tongue as I focused on distracting myself. Nothing would ever come of falling for Jack, either. Was I always going to throw my efforts into things that were for naught? I glared at one of the beds, where a thick downy quilt and six pillows all stuffed with goose feathers were lying on the mattress.

"I managed to get you a room so you have your own space," Jack told me, clearly trying to fill the awkward silence. "I'll get you the key by tonight so you don't feel like you kicked me out of my bed."

"Thank you." I couldn't look at him. I ought to feel glad that neither of us would have to sleep in the dog barn again, but the only

thing I managed to think of was that now I would be even farther away from Jack.

"It wasn't a lack of desire, you know," Jack said hesitantly. "Back there."

"I know that, too." The tingling sensation was beginning to fade. "It just isn't fair!" I burst out. "The king and queen have done so much for you, but you still aren't allowed…"

"It isn't up to them," Jack reminded me. "The ten lords need to propose a law before the royal family signs—"

"I know, I know." I sighed. "I just wish there were an easier way."

"It isn't out of the realm of possibility," Jack told me encouragingly. "The lords already drafted several proposals before that were signed into law. Your father was working on a bill that would grant full rights, and it was gaining popularity."

"But that was when my father was alive and advocating for mage rights." I sighed again. "And until his will is discovered, we don't have a tenth lord."

Jack's smile was forced as he crossed to the exit. After a moment of listening at the door, he eased it open. "If both you and your stepmother agreed on it, you could both sign on behalf of the tenth lord since you're the only ones claiming the estate, otherwise you would have to wait until one of you is officially proclaimed as the next lord." He held the door open for me, and I slipped out, waiting until he silently closed and locked it again.

"Ah, but that would assume my stepmother and I agree on anyth—" I stopped dead in my tracks, paralyzed when I saw that, at the very end of the hall, my stepmother was staring as we left her rooms. She was watching Jack and me with her arms crossed, a knowing smile playing about her lips.

She knew.

CHAPTER 10

"No," I breathed, staring back at Valencia. Jack whirled about, his lips parted and eyes wide.

My mouth worked, trying to form any words that would defend us and convince my stepmother that she was seeing things… anything that would protect Jack and me. But my tongue had turned to lead and lost the ability to move.

"Excuse me!" Jack called to her, straightening and walking briskly down the hall.

Too late.

Valencia turned, trotting down the stairs at a brisk pace and acting as though she hadn't heard him.

Jack and I ran after her in a panic. I had no idea what I would say, but I had to do *something*. Jack could lose everything. I couldn't let it happen. By the time we reached the top of the stairs, my stepmother was already at the bottom, wending her way down the hall and throwing a few backward glances our way. Was she about to report us?

Heart hammering, I chased after her with Jack.

"Beg pardon!" Jack called again, trying to look dignified while walking as quickly as he could. A guard stationed at the bottom of the stairs raised a solitary eyebrow as Jack and I went dashing past. "A word, if you please, madam!"

Once she was halfway down the hall, far enough away from the guard that we wouldn't be overheard, Jack finally caught up to her. I followed a few steps behind, still trying to think of something to say.

"What?" Valencia made no illusions of etiquette or grace as she pivoted sharply. The self-satisfied smirk she wore froze my insides. She was going to tell.

"About what you thought you might have seen—" Jack began, but Valencia cut him off.

"What's it worth to you for me not to tell?" she asked, her smirk broadening.

Jack and I exchanged looks.

"I think you may have misunderstood what you saw—" I started to say, but my stepmother snorted in derision.

"I know exactly what I saw and heard, as well as what would happen if I reported it. So I ask again, what's it worth to you for me not to tell?"

"Uh…" What was it worth to me? What was I willing to sacrifice? Was she about to ask that I relinquish my claim on the estate?

Jack remained silent, staring at my stepmother with a locked jaw.

"Nothing?" Valencia tapped one of her perfectly polished and painted nails against her chin. "How unfortunate."

"You realize that you are trying to blackmail one of the kingdom's royal advisors, don't you?" Jack said in a low voice. He kept his tone level and non-accusatory, but the threat was there.

"It's not *blackmail,*" she answered silkily, glancing over her shoulder to ensure we were still out of earshot of the guards. "It is simply encouragement to forget what I saw."

"What is it you hope to gain?" Jack asked calmly. I wished I had his ability to remain level-headed in situations like these. I wanted to push one of the suits of armor over onto her the next time she walked by one.

Valencia looked remarkably unabashed for someone who was blatantly blackmailing two individuals. "To be honest, I haven't decided yet. But I'm sure we can all come to a reasonable agreement."

"When?" Jack shifted slightly, placing himself between me and my stepmother, and I wondered if he did so to protect me from my stepmother, or to stop me from launching myself at her. Both options seemed equally likely.

"I'd like to meet with you this evening," she told Jack, then turned to me. "As for you, tomorrow, right after breakfast."

"But that's when the next event begins," I protested.

"I guess an hour with the prince matters more to you than keeping this gentleman out of prison then." Valencia shrugged. "How telling. If you change your mind, I'll still be available. Have a good afternoon, you two." Her lip curled. "There are still plenty of other closets to hide in. You may want to choose more wisely in the future. Not everyone is as understanding as I am."

While Jack met with Valencia that evening, Octavius showed me to the room I had been assigned, grumbling all the while about how everyone made so many demands on him all the time.

"I appreciate it," I called after him, and he irritably raised a hand as he stalked back down the hall.

"Noelle?"

I turned. Vallia was there, holding the bag I'd left in the carriage when we first set out together, what felt like a month ago.

"Hello," I said cautiously.

"I brought you your dress," she said, holding the bag out to me and scuffing her slipper-clad toe against the hallway rug. "I really am sorry about before."

"I appreciate you saying so." I accepted the bag, glad that I had one more day's worth of clothing.

"Can I ask you something?" Vallia didn't look at me and addressed the doorknob instead.

"Go ahead."

"Do you even like the prince?"

"Why does that matter to you?"

She finally lifted her gaze to meet mine. "Because I really do."

A twinge of regret mingled with my anger at the rest of my stepfamily. Had Valencia told her about Jack and me breaking into their suite earlier in the day?

Vallia nibbled her lip before speaking again. "Why do you want to marry him?"

"I'll do anything to get my school back, you know that."

"I know. But don't you think it's unfair that you're taking the chance away from someone who does have feelings for the prince?"

I tilted my head. "Why are you so willing to speak your mind around me but not around your sister or mother? Did you agree with them when they left me on the road?"

"No. I told you that during the ball."

I sighed. I wished it was easier to navigate what was right and wrong. It would be so much simpler if all three members of my stepfamily always behaved horrendously, but while I didn't want to ostracize the only one who showed me kindness, I also didn't want her to think that what she had let happen was acceptable.

"Thank you for my dress, Vallia. That was kind of you to return it."

"You're welcome." She hesitated, then added, "Mama said you may drop out of attending the future balls. Is that true?"

Had she weaseled that information out of Jack? I didn't think he would let that sort of information slip. "I'm planning on attending the balls. Why do you ask?"

"I just really like the prince, and I don't want to compete against you if I don't have to."

"I'm staying in the competition until I get my inheritance back. I wish you the best, but I'm not planning on dropping out."

She nodded miserably. "I thought as much." She turned to go back to her room.

I closed the door and pulled the dress out of the bag. I would need to get some of the wrinkles out, but at least I had one more gown for one more day. What would Valencia demand of me the

next day? What was she asking Jack for and when would I see him again?

As if in answer to my questions, there was a knock on my window. Looking around, I saw Jack's face inches from the glass. I hastily unlocked the window and shivered as both he and the frigid winter air entered. Poking my head out, I saw an ice ladder that stretched from the ground floor all the way up to my window.

"Did anyone see you?" I asked breathlessly, snapping the window closed again and rubbing my arms.

"Who would be outside in this weather at midnight?"

"No one in their right mind, that's for sure. But tell me—did you meet with Valencia? What did she ask for?" I whispered. Even though we were completely alone and my door was locked, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being watched. I pulled him away from the window and peered around, as if I expected my stepmother or Octavius to climb down out of the fireplace chimney with guards in tow, ordering them to tote Jack off to the dungeons.

"Nothing I'm unwilling to give," Jack answered evasively. "It really wasn't much."

"What was it?"

"She just wants her daughters allowed to stay to the end of the competition. Considering how many girls there are still, as well as how highly recommended they've been this whole time, it won't look suspicious."

I shook my head wearily. "Of course. She wants Vallia or Vanessa to marry the prince."

Jack shrugged. "That's what they are all here for."

"Except me."

Jack smiled. "Except you."

"Does that mean you agreed?"

"I told her that as long as she keeps her mouth shut and leaves you alone, her daughters can stay. I already spoke with Stephen about it."

"What?" I squeaked. "You told him?"

"I had to. I was worried he might send them home otherwise."

"But now he'll know that we…that you and I…"

"He doesn't know that part." Jack dug the toe of his boot into the carpet. "Just that your stepmother threatened to report me for something I'd rather she hadn't seen. She's very slippery. Normally I wouldn't hesitate to report someone like her, but if she tells the right people about what she saw…"

"I know," I sighed. "She has a knack for looking innocent while making others look guilty."

"What's her history? How did she and your father meet and when did they get married?"

"I don't know much about her childhood or anything," I admitted. "I believe she met my father when he was speaking about mage rights. She was some type of nurse or physician before she married her first husband and had Vallia and Vanessa. Her first husband passed away, and she moved here to Nieva three years ago and married my father. She was always very good about pretending to be interested in whatever he was passionate about, and he said that she made him feel young again. I was glad for that. He had been ill for quite some time after Mama died, then once he and Valencia started seeing each other, he seemed to find renewed energy. I thought they would be good for each other at first."

"What changed? She doesn't give me the impression of being good for anyone now."

"She was always good at charming the people she wants to. I wish I could say that she loved Papa, but it felt more like she was using him to fund her vanity. She did make Papa genuinely happy while he was alive though. Even if she and I didn't get along, I could look past that if Papa was happy. But once he died, she became extremely resentful of me. Then we couldn't find the will and she shut down the school."

"Now she knows about us." Jack blew out a stream of air.

"There's no *us* for her to know about. We haven't done anything. There is no rule saying that mages can't take ice skating lessons from non-mages, or spend time with them, or…"

"Noelle," Jack said softly. "If anyone looks at us when we're together, they'll know. I can't hide it anymore."

I couldn’t stop looking at him. Several times, Jack made as if to touch me, but he held himself back. “I asked the scribes about the empty slot where your father’s will should have been. They said they did have one some time back, but it was recalled a year ago, so before his death. Did your stepmother ever come here without your father?”

“As far as I know, this is the first time she’s ever been here. She always avoided going with Papa on his work trips.”

“Do you think we can trust her to keep her word about not telling?”

“No, but I don’t think we have much choice. I just need to see what she asks me for tomorrow.”

Jack swung his legs over the windowsill to step onto the ladder’s first rung and step down. Ignoring the frigid air seeping in, I clung to the sill. Our eyes connected, and I was on the verge of leaning forward when a clatter came from the hall behind my closed door. Why couldn’t Jack and I ever be alone?

“Good night,” he told me, descending the ladder and disappearing into the swirling whiteness of the snow. It felt like a part of me went with him and I vowed that I would protect him, no matter what.

The next day, I steeled myself and strode purposefully past the ballroom until I found my stepmother. She had perched herself at the edge of a long sofa in an empty sitting room and was smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles on her skirts, looking as perfectly put together as always.

If she asked for anything that was absurd, I could simply say no. She didn’t have physical proof that would incriminate Jack…not that I knew of, anyway. But if it wasn’t an outrageous request, I was willing to give almost anything to keep Jack safe.

Valencia spotted me the moment I entered the room. "Noelle, darling, come sit," she offered, patting the velvet cushion beside her with a cold smile on her heavily painted lips.

Darling? "No, thank you."

She *tsked* softly as she ran her gloved hand along the cushion so the fibers stood on end then were smoothed down again on her reverse pass. "So mistrusting when I'm merely trying to help you."

"Are you now?" I asked, matching her icy tone. "And here I was thinking that you blackmailed me just yesterday."

"No, no. I'm *helping*. I care about your well-being." Her bottom lip pouted out like she was in her teens instead of in her fifties. Even with her unusually smooth skin, she didn't appear *that* young. "It's obvious that you have feelings for the prince's advisor." She let out a high, bell-like laugh. "Why else would you two be constantly finding excuses to sneak out together and hide in closets together?"

I locked my jaw and didn't answer. *Just spit it out!* I wanted to shout. "I'm missing seeing the prince for this. What do you want from me?"

"That advisor seems to return your affections as well," she continued. "I have a proposition that I think would benefit you both a great deal. I'd like to offer a trade." After a moment rummaging around in her mink fur handbag, she extracted a sheaf of parchment. "If you withdraw from the competition—"

"I won't do anything you tell me to."

"Let me finish," she cooed. "*If* you withdraw from the competition, I will provide you with your father's will and all the documents regarding the inheritance. I'll even go with you to the magistrate to give testimony of their validity."

I could have heard the snow falling with how silent the room became.

"That's it? I simply withdraw?" It sounded too good to be true. If I was given my inheritance and withdrew from the competition, I would be able to reopen the school. I would have the funding to pay the license renewal fee with a day to spare.

"That's it. As far as I know, you don't have any romantic feelings toward Prince Stephen, but my girls are both smitten. I think this

proposition would benefit everyone, so as a show of good faith, I have a gift for you." She fluttered the thick parchment at me and smiled graciously, but the warmth didn't reach her eyes. "It would be such a shame if you inherited the estate without the man you want to go along with it. Just imagine if you two could be together forever."

Slowly, I took it, not taking my eyes off Valencia until I'd backed up several steps. I skimmed through the document, and my heart gave a leap. This document was the bill Father had been working on, the one to grant full rights to mages—from legalizing marriage to non-mages to allowing them to own land and businesses. It would make it so Jack could do anything a non-mage could. By the looks of it, there were nine of the ten necessary lord signatures, even Lord Relyn's who had been the bill's biggest opponent. Only my father's was missing. There was even the wax seal from the scribe's guild to show that it had been reviewed and approved.

"Your father's greatest work," Valencia sighed. "He'd been working on it for years before he passed away. He secured one of the final signatures only a week before his death, and I secured Lord Relyn's the night of the feast. Your father didn't sign because he intended to do so when he presented it to the king."

I reverently touched the empty space that lacked Father's sharp signature.

"I want it to be his legacy," Valencia continued. "So that even after his death, his ability to help people like your friend Jack lives on. I shared Cedric's passion, even if we showed it differently. It's what drew me to him in the first place, and I see that same fire in you."

Against my will, I was touched at her thoughtfulness. Had I become so blinded by hate and malice that I refused to see the good in the woman my father had married? He truly had seemed happy around her. Perhaps I had missed my own mother so much that I had blatantly rejected her attempts at friendship. Even if we'd had our spats in the past, she was extending an olive branch now. Was that enough to make up from her previous actions?

"Even so, you shut down my school and left me abandoned in the middle of a frozen forest," I reminded her, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. "So forgive my skepticism. You're giving me a gift to help mages, just because?"

"You were safe when you had your dog with you, and the school's shutdown was only temporary while we sorted out the legalities like we are doing right now. You don't need to trust me; trust your feelings for Jack. We have had some different perspectives on things in the past, so to show you that my heart is in the right place, yes, this is a gift free of any obligation if you want it. But in order for it to be legalized, we both need to sign and agree on this since there is no consensus on who is to inherit the estate yet."

She extracted a quill and bottle of ink from the depths of her bag.

I didn't take it. "Why are you doing this?"

She widened her eyes. "Your father always said that the way mages were mistreated was wrong. This is my way of honoring his memory. Besides, I know he would want me to help you, and you're like a daughter to me. I want to help you. You deserve this."

I still held myself back, eyes narrowed. My stepmother had never done anything to help anyone other than herself and her daughters.

Valencia, clearly understanding my reservations, smiled broadly. "Your father opened my eyes to so much. Magic by itself is inherently neither good nor evil. It's what mages *choose* to do with their abilities that is far more telling—just as a knife can be the best of tools or the worst of weapons. I think we ought to give mages the same rights that the rest of us enjoy, don't you agree?

Everything about this sounded right but felt wrong. "So if we both sign this and it's approved by the royal family, a relationship between Ja—between mages and non-mages would be legalized? And you are giving it to me, no strings attached?"

"None at all."

"Meaning if I sign, you intend to turn this in to the king, whether or not I withdraw?"

"Correct."

"Then you sign first," I challenged. It would be so like Valencia to dangle something as tempting as this in front of me then snatch it back at the last moment. For all my hope that she was extending an olive branch to heal our relationship, I would be a fool to allow her any control over me or my hopes and dreams for the future. Judging by some of our interactions in the past, I wouldn't put it past her to have me sign and then throw it into the fire once I withdrew from the competition.

"Certainly." With a flourish, Valencia signed her name.

My apprehension grew. It just wasn't right. None of this was right. It was all too easy. Nothing with my stepmother was ever given freely. I watched as Valencia puckered her lips and blew on her signature to dry the ink. There it was, looking perfectly legal and official. Too good to be true was just that—too good to be true.

"Would I be able to have someone look at it before I sign?"

"Ah." Her hand came to rest lightly on top of the parchment —"Only if he looks at it while I'm present. It took a great deal of work for your father and me to secure these signatures. I don't want it out of my sight."

It must be a forgery. Why else would she want to be present when it was examined? But for what purpose? If Jack and I would only gain from relationships like ours being legalized and I didn't have to give Valencia anything for it, it would simply make her look foolish in front of the court to present a forged document. Did she intend to have me present it in order to discredit me or incriminate me for having feelings for Jack?

Although…there was the very slim, remote chance that she was telling the truth. Father *had* been working on this proposal for a long time. It still didn't explain why Valencia was willing to help me secure a future with the man I was interested in, other than that it advanced her own daughters' possibilities. But if it was real…I had to know.

"I'm not saying I agree to your terms," I said in a rush, "but I would like for my…my friend to take a look at it." Jack dealt with enough legal forms that he would be able to tell if it was a forgery or not.

"We can go now if you like. If you intend to withdraw, there is no need for you to attend the rest of the competition. Just imagine what you would gain—you wouldn't have to teach in that miserable little hovel anymore. You would be able to build a mansion."

My misgivings increased. What was her hurry? Was she so convinced that I would win the competition for Stephen's hand that she wanted me to withdraw immediately? But she had also claimed that she would be willing to hand it in no matter if I withdrew or not. There was no need to stay and compete if I would be given my inheritance and the real possibility of a future with Jack.

I nodded stiffly. "If this is a real proposal, I'm willing to entertain the possibility, but only after it is accepted as valid and binding."

"Of course." She packed everything into her large handbag. "That's very wise of you to make sure it is credible. You're a very intelligent girl." As she swept toward the door, she attempted to loop her elbow into mine as if we were best friends on a stroll together, but I avoided her touch. Even if she was offering something I wanted, that didn't make us friends.

CHAPTER 11

"Stay here," I ordered my stepmother once I saw Jack at the end of the hall.

Still clutching her handbag in a death grip, she nodded agreeably and fell back.

"Well?" Jack asked in a stage whisper the moment he got within earshot. "What did she want?"

I fumbled for words as I balled and unballed my fists, eyebrows knitted together. "She offered to submit my father's proposed bill to King Wensecles to grant mages full rights—without asking for anything in return."

Jack's white eyebrows jumped up into his hair. "But that's a good thing, isn't it?" He glanced down the hall, where Valencia waited patiently, smiling at us in the distance.

"But she also said that she would give me the documents about my father's estate and testify to the magistrate of their authenticity if I drop out of the competition."

"Isn't…isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes," I answered slowly, "but it doesn't feel right."

"What's not right about it? You would have your father's estate and we could…I mean, if you wanted…we could…see each other." Jack's cheeks turned a light shade of pink. "I'd like that."

"I would too, but…she wouldn't just give up like this. I know my stepmother. She plays to win. She wouldn't give up the entire estate

for the possibility of one of her daughters marrying the prince."

"But if she keeps her word, you would get everything you want. We could be together and you could reopen the school—"

"I know, I know." I wrapped a coil of hair around my finger and released it again. "I'm just trying to see how this would benefit her. She wouldn't offer otherwise."

"If you drop out and it's her girls left, they do stand a good chance of being the last ones here. It would benefit her greatly to thin out the competition. She doesn't need an estate if one of her daughters becomes queen. What does it matter to lose an estate if you gain an entire kingdom? Knowing what your opponent wants is the key to any successful negotiation. She's willing to sacrifice for a greater gain in the end."

"But why the offer to get the bill passed? That doesn't benefit her at all!"

"It does if it gets you to agree to her terms. She must have known she would need to do something to make up for her previous actions and that you would hesitate to agree to any requests otherwise." Jack reached for my hand but, with a quick glance at Valencia, simply swung his arm back and forth instead.

"She has all the necessary signatures to send the bill to the king besides mine. Then of course, we would need to get him to sign, too—"

"He will. I told you, he cares about mages. He'll sign."

"Then…I can't see any reason why I shouldn't agree," I said slowly. "Will you look at it first?"

"Of course."

Jack and I walked back to Valencia.

"Do you accept?" she asked eagerly. "It would benefit you both so much."

"May I see it?" Jack asked, hand outstretched.

Valencia reached her talon-like fingers into her bag and withdrew the proposed law, clutched between her blood-red nails. "It's all in order," she assured us as Jack's eyes skated from side to side.

I stared at the paper with Jack. It looked perfectly legal and binding, and I recognized the signatures of the other nine lords. This

was everything I could have dreamed of, and it was all within reach. For several long minutes, Jack and I studied every inch of the parchment, scanning for any possible flaw or error, but found nothing. The language was word perfect to what a bill should have sounded like, the signatures were correct and dated, and the seal of approval from the scribe's guild was stamped to validate that it had been reviewed.

We handed it back and withdrew a short distance to discuss.

"I don't see any downside to signing it," Jack whispered, so quietly that Valencia couldn't hear.

"Nor do I," I admitted. "It doesn't make sense, but as long as we get what we want, it shouldn't matter. And Stephen is free to select whomever he wants to marry. It just feels…"

"Too easy," Jack finished, shaking his head in confusion. "But I also can't see a reason not to accept."

"Nor can I." I took a deep breath as steely resolve flooded me. "And I don't want to wait too long and risk her changing her mind if it really is valid. I only have two days left to get the funding to renew the license."

"Are you okay withdrawing? You'd give up the possibility of marrying Stephen."

"I don't want Stephen. I want…I want you."

A look of pure joy lit up Jack's every feature, brightening his face so much that his hair nearly glowed. "Let's tell her."

Valencia must have known what I was planning to do, because she had the inkpot and quill ready for me, the document already stretched out on a hallway table. "Once you sign, we can take it to the chamberlain and set up an appointment to present it."

I took the quill, the point suspended over the paper. Why did it feel like I was signing my life away? Valencia nodded, eyes hungrily staring at the bill clutched in my hand. Her expression made me want to throw the quill down and run. But my gaze settled on Jack. We could have the possibility of a life together if I simply signed.

It was worth any sacrifice.

Before I could second-guess myself, I scrawled my signature beside Valencia's. The ink gleamed in the light from the flickering

torches, and Valencia fanned it to hurry along the ink drying.

"See, that wasn't so hard, now was it?" she purred. "Shall we go make the arrangements to be granted an audience?"

"Yes." If I had already signed my name, I may as well commit fully. Every inch of my body tingled with anticipation as wariness and excitement flooded my system in equal measure. Jack accompanied us as we sought out the lord chamberlain.

"We're seeking an audience with His Majesty, King Wenceslas," Valencia announced. "We bring a proposition from the ten lords for a new bill."

The lord chamberlain consulted a complicated calendar and flipped pages in a leather-bound book with neat charts and lists of tasks. "I have an opening tomorrow afternoon at lunch time for twenty minutes, or if you need something farther out, I can do—"

"We'll take the appointment tomorrow," Valencia said quickly, not even attempting to disguise her eagerness.

Jack shot me a look and mouthed something, but I couldn't understand what he was trying to tell me.

"Noelle, dear?" Valencia crooned in that syrupy sweet voice I hated so much. "Is that acceptable for you?"

"Yes, that's fine." My stomach writhed and my heartbeat accelerated. Things were moving too quickly for comfort, even though this had been the end goal for years.

"Very well." The chamberlain jotted down our names and made a note, then instructed us when and where to arrive.

"I'll see you tomorrow!" Valencia told me after we left the chamberlain. She flounced away down the hallway with far too much of a self-satisfied spring in her step.

"I can't do tomorrow," Jack told me once she was gone. "Not that it requires me being there, but I have some duties to take care of in Fayrond, the next town over, before the final ball tomorrow night."

"I'll be fine," I said, hoping it was true. "Will you be at the ball tonight?"

"Taking notes, just as always," Jack said with a ghost of a smile. "I have to assess everyone's poise and grace."

"You could always dance with me and find out for yourself about my poise," I suggested, "instead of just writing down what someone else tells you. You said yourself that it is very similar to ice skating."

He grinned. "I shall find a way to be the lucky one to dance with you, and will try to appear like I'm not enjoying it too much."

CHAPTER 12

Most unfortunately, it was Prince Stephen who danced with me for the majority of that evening. He politely inquired about my interests and childhood but didn't ask any questions about Kodiak, and I was unsure how to address his misunderstanding from before. When was the appropriate time to bring up that I wasn't a widowed, single mother? I debated asking him about funding options for the school, but if the bill was passed, as it should be, I would be able to drop out and get my inheritance back. I wouldn't need to trouble Stephen about finances when he was looking for a wife.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jack staring at us, not writing anything down on the papers he clutched with an overly tight grip. Stephen hadn't been holding me any closer than was normal for two dance partners, but I found myself pulling away ever so slightly, trying to show Jack from afar and without words what my feelings were toward Stephen.

"I wish we could walk out to the balcony for more privacy," Stephen said, casting an eye at the windows where drifts of snow swirled past. "I have a great deal I'd like to discuss with you."

My insides clenched, well aware that Stephen was showing more attention to me than to any other woman here. Should I tell him I was planning to withdraw once my stepmother handed over the will? I should, but if Stephen had me leave before I had the will in hand,

there would be no way for me to get the inheritance I needed to reopen the school. Valencia wouldn't hand it over when she could keep it and have her daughters advance. Then there was the issue of the meeting with the king tomorrow. I couldn't have him let me go yet.

"Perhaps a stroll down the hall, then?" I suggested. "I love the tapestries in the north wing."

"An excellent suggestion," Stephen said, guiding me toward the door. Vanessa glared daggers at me as Stephen and I left the ballroom, and Vallia stared at her shoes.

It was as though I could feel the relationship-heavy questions churning in Stephen's mind as we walked toward the north wing. Eager to avoid that topic, I hurriedly told him, "My stepmother and I have a bill we're presenting to your father tomorrow. It's to grant equal rights to mages."

He perked up. "I've been hoping for that," he said warmly as he patted my fingers looped into his elbow. "That is something I care deeply about. I'm hopeful that the person I marry shares my same concern for the mage population."

"I'm sure you'll do a great service for mages in your time as king," I said evasively before abruptly changing the topic. "This tapestry is beautiful." Eager to redirect his attention, I pointed at the nearest tapestry without examining it first.

Stephen raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't describe it as beautiful, exactly."

I looked at it. The tapestry depicted a battle scene of knights hunting a wild boar. Crimson blood was splattered at the base of a pear tree, a spear jutting out of it while a partridge flapped its wings in the branches above. "I…I just meant…the stitchery is well-done. The realism is admirable. Do you need to get back to the other women? I'm sure they're all eager to dance with you."

"I'm sure they are," he sighed. "Several of them are rather aggressive in dropping hints about wanting a proposal." Then he blanched. "I didn't mean to sound unkind about any of them. I apologize. I know you have two stepsisters here as well."

"Then you will know how much I understand their behavior. Nothing you've said surprises me, particularly if you meant Vanessa."

Tension melted from Stephen's shoulders. "I should think more before I speak."

"If you did that, you might end up eternally silent."

He chuckled quietly. The entrance back into the ballroom was visible at the end of the long corridor. Already, some of the women had poked their heads out, waiting for Stephen's return. His arm stiffened under my fingers and his footsteps slowed until we were moving at glacial speed.

"I'd like to see you again tomorrow," Stephen said.

"Assuming I'm allowed to stay."

"I can tell you right now that you will be asked to stay. I enjoy your company." Stephen said it in a matter-of-fact tone that wasn't the least bit romantic, but still, guilt crept in. It felt like I was betraying Jack's trust by receiving such comments from Stephen.

"And I enjoy your friendship as well, but…I must be honest." I swallowed and braced myself. No inheritance was worth toying with someone's affections. "You're wonderful, but I…I'm not in love with you."

"I know." Wholly unfazed by my confession, Stephen smiled. "As a matter of fact, I struggle to believe that anyone can fall in love in the short period of time we've had together. It is concerning when women profess to love me when they know nothing about me."

My muscles relaxed. "And how often are you receiving these confessions of love?"

"As of late, several times a day," Stephen responded heavily.

"I'm sure many men would be elated to have so many declarations of love," I teased.

Stephen wearily shook his head. "One woman is more than enough for a man to handle. Any man who wishes to entertain multiple women has either never done so or is a cad."

"A very honorable outlook," I told Stephen. We began walking at a normal pace again. Once we got back, he would be nabbed by one or more of the girls hovering around the threshold.

"If you see your father tomorrow morning," I said in a rush, "would you encourage him to sign the bill? I used to teach at a school for young mages, but it was recently shut down. I'd love to see mages be granted equal rights."

"I'll do what I can," Stephen answered with a smile. "We share the same goal. I wish you luck with your meeting and look forward to hearing all about your school tomorrow night."

He led me back to the ballroom, and the second he kissed my hand in farewell, he was mobbed by three of the remaining ten women, all clamoring for his attention.

I did my best to fade into the background, near Jack and the other advisors. "You were gone a long time," Jack said in my ear. He had his notes out in front of him and pretended to be scribbling on the papers, but his quill never touched the parchment. He raised his head and addressed another advisor. "Has anyone danced with Noelle tonight besides the prince?"

The other man consulted his notes. "Not yet. Want me to?"

"I can handle it," Jack said, calmly handing over his notes.

No one paid us any mind as Jack slowly revolved with me until we were in the darkest part of the ballroom, unnoticed and forgotten. Across the dance floor, Stephen had selected another girl to walk with, and the advisors were milling around the nine other ladies, asking them questions or steering them onto the dance floor.

It was infuriating to maintain the distance between me and Jack for the remainder of the evening as we danced then staged a lengthy interview at a far table while he jotted down notes. Most girls hurried back to their rooms after they'd had their turn walking with Stephen, well aware that their time with him was ended for the day. As the last girl left, the orchestra ground to a halt and packed up their instruments while Stephen came to bid me good night and the other advisors trickled away.

Finally, it was just me and Jack left in the ballroom. Every sound echoed in the vast, empty space, but it was peaceful without the commotion of everyone else. For several minutes, we sat in silence, waiting until the last distant footsteps faded. I stayed seated while Jack rose and looked out the door down the hall. As he re-entered,

he kicked the doorjambs out so the heavy doors slowly thudded shut, closing us into the dim, empty ballroom together.

"Would you like to dance again?" Jack asked quietly.

"I'd love to."

He pulled me to my feet and pulled me into his arms even though there was no music. This time, I rested my head against his chest and wrapped both arms around his neck, breathing in his peppermint scent that I loved so much.

"I wish I could kiss you," he breathed.

"No one is watching," I whispered back. "They wouldn't ever know."

"It's still illegal," he reminded me, but his hands flexed on my waist.

My pulse quickened and I leaned back so I could face him instead of resting my head against him. "Technically, it's only illegal for you to be *courting* someone. You could probably kiss whomever you want."

"I'm still the prince's advisor. I need to set an example."

"You need to set an example for all the vast crowd here?" I inquired, nodding at the completely vacated room. "What if…what if a woman kissed you?" I could barely breathe as I asked. "If you were just innocently standing there and a wild woman was the aggressor, you wouldn't be at fault in the slightest."

His features were lit up as a sly smile elevated the corners of his mouth. "You're right. I would be entirely blameless."

My ears rang with a tinny whistle as I dropped my gaze down to study his mouth. A sudden shyness battled against my brazen suggestion.

"You wouldn't feel attacked?" I asked, trying to build up the courage to close the final gap between us.

"I would welcome it," he breathed, tilting his head down toward mine. "Please attack me all you want."

Fueled by the irrational fear that we might be seen, I felt compelled to pull Jack into the shadows, even though no one else was around. "I don't want you to get in trouble," I explained, looking for some excuse to procrastinate the kiss that I desperately wanted

but suddenly felt shy about. “Just in case someone misinterprets what they see.”

“We can’t have that, can we?”

We were in the most shadowed part of the deserted ballroom, quite alone. There had been so many opportunities to kiss in the past and we had held ourselves back each time. Now that we were on the eve of having the bill signed that would allow our romance, it still felt forbidden and dangerous enough that I couldn’t stop staring around, waiting for someone to jump out and catch us in wrongdoing. “I’m nervous,” I admitted.

“You aren’t the only one.” He visibly swallowed. “I think the other advisors already suspect we may have something going on. You’ll notice that they made themselves scarce and no one offered to take over questioning you.”

“They suspect us?” I squeaked. “What are we supposed to do?”

Jack stroked my face. “There’s nothing much we can do if it’s true. But if I’m going to be punished for a crime, I at least want to have committed it.”

I could barely breathe. “You really have a penchant for breaking rules, don’t you?”

“If there is a cause worth breaking rules for, yes. Look.” He pointed upward.

A sprig of mistletoe hung underneath the pinnacle of the tall, arched window we were standing under. The heavy silence filling the vast room pressed on my ears, making me keenly aware of my beating heart and of how loud each breath sounded.

“You look beautiful.” There was that piercing look in his vividly blue eyes again. They somehow appeared both frosty and as though they could melt even the coldest heart. He pulled gently on my hand, and I obeyed the pressure, allowing Jack to guide me directly under the mistletoe. “May I?”

Suddenly so shy that I found myself unable to form words, I nodded. Jack appeared equally as nervous as he leaned in. He closed his eyes too soon and miscalculated how short I was compared to him, and his lips pressed against the tip of my nose.

“Hey,” I scolded softly. “No nipping at my nose.”

I raised up to my tiptoes, holding on to his shoulders for support, and eagerly waited for him to lean in again. This time, his aim was true. Elation flooded through me as I sank into the kiss, allowing Jack to press his lips against mine.

Heat flared up inside me as I returned the pressure. Jack's hands clutched at my waist, and a sudden, permeating cold swirled through the air and up my sides. Snowflakes began falling around us and frost crept up my dress from where Jack was touching my waist.

Jack began brushing the frost away, his face darkening to maroon, which only made his hair appear whiter and his eyes bluer. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know that would happen!"

I caught his hands. "No need to apologize." I dropped my gaze down to his mouth again. "Does that happen often?"

"I can usually control it better than that," Jack said, gazing around at the sparkling snow falling from the ceiling.

"You'll have to give me a demonstration sometime. For the time being, do you need to keep your hands behind your back or something?"

"I don't think I could do that," Jack confessed, his hands creeping back up to circle around my waist.

"Good. I really don't want you to, anyway."

He kissed me again, and I wished the moment would never end.

CHAPTER 13

So filled with joy from our kiss the previous evening, I had barely slept at all. Even without much rest, I felt rejuvenated enough the next morning that I was able to wake up early and get food and water ready for the dogs when Jack brought them back from their run.

Jack and I couldn't stop smiling at each other as the dogs wolfed down their breakfast. I couldn't believe my luck. In a few short hours, the king would get the bill and hopefully begin the process of signing it into effect. I would withdraw from the competition, procure the will from Valencia and obtain the funding to reopen my school. Jack and I would be able to announce our relationship. All my dreams were within reach.

It was impossible to resist grazing my hand across Jack's back each time I passed him or allowing our fingers to brush as we readied the dogs for Jack's trip. Each touch felt just as intoxicating as the last, laced with desire that wouldn't have to remain forbidden much longer.

"Want me to show you what I made for the final ball before I go?" Jack asked. "I've been working on them for a long time."

"It's cheating if you show me things ahead of time," I answered with a laugh. "We don't have to break *every* rule, you know. I'm still a competitor, remember?"

“Not for long,” Jack said with a grin. “Besides, it wouldn’t matter if you know about this one ahead of time anyway. It’s just shoes.”

I finished securing the pad coverings on Ace’s paws as Jack unlocked a cabinet I’d never paid attention to before. Lined up on shelves in neat rows were six pairs of glass slippers.

No, I corrected myself, they weren’t glass. I leaned closer to inspect them. They were made of ice.

“Your doing?” I asked Jack, fingering one of the slippers, which was surprisingly warm and comfortable. “Won’t they melt?”

“Not these ones,” he said proudly. “It is my finest spell work, if I do say so myself. The ice won’t melt, no matter how long they’re worn.”

“Have I told you recently how incredible you are?”

He chuckled and picked up one of the slippers. “These will feel unbearably cold to any girl who isn’t romantically attracted to the prince. We’ll have everyone put the shoes on at the same time. The shoes will be too cold to wear for a prolonged period for anyone who is planning to use the marriage for advantage, but if there is a woman who genuinely loves the prince, they’ll feel warm and comfortable.”

I snatched my hand away from the warm slipper. “What do they feel like to you?” I asked, my mouth suddenly dry.

He laughed. “I made them, so I don’t think it counts for me. If you’re asking me if I’m in love with Stephen, the answer is no.”

I tried to smile and swallow the lump rising in my throat at the same time. It must be a fluke that the slippers were warm for me. I wasn’t in love with Stephen. “How can you be sure the spell will work?”

Jack raised one of his eyebrows. “A mage knows his spells. I guess we will find out for sure at the competition this evening. You can try yours on. I know you’re going to withdraw, so you obviously won’t wear them tonight, but I’d already made all the shoes.” He picked up the smallest, and I shook my head from side to side.

“That isn’t a question I need an answer to. I won’t be competing.”

"I won't make you wear them for long; it's just to check and see that they fit." Jack looked so proud of his creations and so eager for my help that I couldn't say no.

I slipped off my shoes and left my stockings on. I went to reach for the slipper, but Jack pulled it back. "You have to have bare feet to see if they're warm or cold."

I eased off my stocking. *I don't love Stephen*, I told myself firmly, praying that the shoe wouldn't be warm the second time I touched it. *I don't love him; it will be cold.*

To my dismay, the shoe instantly felt warm the second my toes came in contact with it. Jack looked up eagerly. "Warm or cold?"

I faked a shiver. "Very cold." As quicky as I could, I removed the shoe and handed it back. "That will be the perfect test for all the girls."

Jack looked confused. "It felt cold to you?"

My anxiety grew. Why would he be confused? He surely couldn't think I had feelings for Stephen. "Extremely. Girls could get frostbite wearing shoes like that."

Jack examined the shoe I'd handed him, his features twisted in suspicion. "It felt warm to me."

"Ooh, maybe you *are* in love with Stephen," I teased, desperate to move the conversation in any other direction. Had it turned warm simply because Stephen and I were friends? Was the coldness supposed to occur with anyone who had animosity toward the prince? Because I saw him as a friend, did that make my feelings more genuine than other girls? If Jack discovered that the slippers were warm for me…thank goodness I was going to withdraw, and the sooner the better at this rate.

Jack shook his head. "It felt warm. Maybe I did do the spell wrong."

"I'm not in love with Stephen," I assured him.

He continued to look suspicious, and I looked out to check the sun's position, but it was still covered by the heavy grey clouds threatening a blizzard.

"I need to go; Valencia and I are planning to take the bill to the king soon and I know you have to head over to Fayrond. I'll see you

later when you get back. The slippers look beautiful. You did a wonderful job."

"I'll see you tonight at the ball, then," Jack said, replacing the slippers on the shelf and locking the cabinet again. "I can't wait to hear all about the bill signing. I wish I could be there for it."

"I wish you could, too."

A sudden crunching of footsteps and the scrape of the door latch made us spring away from each other. It was simply a page boy with a scroll, which he handed to Jack before promptly leaving again.

"Just a correspondence to the lord there that I need to deliver," Jack said, tucking it into his inside coat pocket. "But this time of year, the village is only accessible by dog sled, so I was elected to take it."

"If you wait until I withdraw, I could come with you," I offered. I didn't want there to be a doubt in Jack's mind about where my affections were directed, not after he'd felt the slipper warm to my touch.

"I have to go now in order to make it back by the ball's opening," Jack apologized. He led his dogs to the barn door and pushed it open. "Good luck with the meeting!"

Valencia answered the door at my first knock. She was dressed so lavishly that I barely recognized her. Her auburn hair was piled on top of her head in an elegant braided updo and her cosmetics has been applied so carefully that she appeared fifteen years younger.

"Noelle, darling," she said in her fawning voice, curling her lip back to reveal her teeth. "I was starting to wonder if you'd forgotten or if you weren't as interested in your handsome advisor as I'd thought."

I longed to throw back a retort but held my tongue. If she was telling the truth, then dealing with my stepmother for a short period

of time would be worth it. Jack and I would be able to be together, and that was worth enduring anything.

I forced my face into a smile. "I'm glad we can agree on this. Shall we?" I gestured at the hallway.

Valencia called a farewell to her daughters, who were already in the early stages of preparing for the final ball, and trotted down the corridor next to me.

"The will is all ready to be handed over as soon as I hear that you've withdrawn," she said, a cheery, singsong quality to her voice that still made chills run up and down my body.

"I'll only withdraw if this is valid," I reminded her, nodding at the document.

"Oh, it is. I told you that your father and I were working on it for years before he passed away, and I was finally able to secure the final signature besides ours just a few days ago. His Majesty the king will be so thrilled to hear we succeeded at last."

I nodded, but my apprehension remained. I couldn't think of anything else to say to Valencia as we wound our way through the castle. She must have wanted very badly for one of her daughters to win and really feared that Stephen would pick me if she was willing to give so much. I ought to be grateful.

The large double doors to the throne room were guarded by two soldiers in metal armor, crossing their spears to bar entry to any uninvited visitors. The chamberlain checked his list of appointments when he heard our names. "Yes, I have you here. The king and queen will see you now," he said, turning to nod at the guards to open the doors, who uncrossed their spears and grabbed the handles.

We began to step forward, but Valencia tripped and fell before the doors could open. The bill fluttered to the ground, and I hastily scooped it up. With a little cry of pain, Valencia clutched at her ankle. "I think I twisted it," she moaned. One of the guards stepped forward to help her up, but instead of standing, she collapsed against him the moment she tried to put weight on the injured foot.

"I could carry you," the guard suggested awkwardly, but Valencia shook her head.

"No, I don't want to call any attention to myself, not when this is such a momentous occasion." She turned to me, a fond smile lifting her lips. "Noelle, would you be willing to present it on your own? I don't think I can manage right now."

My foreboding increased and I hesitated. Was this all a grand setup to embarrass me?

She hobbled a few shaky steps to brace herself against a hall table. "I'll wait for you back at my room. Besides, it's better this way—it was your father who worked his whole life toward granting equal rights to mages. It seems fitting that his daughter be the one to carry on his legacy."

The guards and herald all nodded and beamed at her statement, and I worked to keep a calm expression and not let my brow furrow. Why on earth was I so suspicious about supposedly good things happening? If it turned out to be a forgery or some sort of hoax, I wouldn't be to blame as I was merely the messenger. If it was the actual bill that Jack and Valencia claimed it was, it would only benefit me. My palms grew sweaty and I stared so hard at the parchment it was in danger of being set aflame from the intensity of my gaze. Had she swapped it for an alternate? No, it seemed to be the same one she'd shown me before.

"Very well," I said, and held my head high, and ignoring the beads of sweat that trickled down my back. "I shall present it and meet you back at your room shortly."

"I'll escort you," the guard said, helping Valencia limp back down the corridor.

Once they turned the corner, the doors in front of me opened. I pinched the paper, holding it firmly so it wouldn't get crumpled, and held my head high. It was time to do my father proud. King Wenceslas and Queen Isolde smiled at me as I approached, my footsteps sounding unnaturally loud considering that I was walking on a carpet leading up to their thrones.

"Lady Noelle Frost," the herald called in his loud, booming voice, "has come to present a bill for consideration."

I swallowed and did my best to appear as confident as Father would have if he'd been here.

"This is a proposition to grant full and equal rights to all mages," I said, glad that my voice didn't imitate the trembling I felt in my hands and feet.

"Yes, Lord Cedric and Jack were working on this for years before Cedric's passing," the king said, beckoning for the paper. The page boy at his side leapt to take it from me and handed it over. "I'm glad to see that it has finally made it through all the appropriate channels. We've been waiting for this for a long time."

The queen rested her chin gently on her hand, head tilted slightly to the side. "You do look so like your father."

"You never forget a face," the king chuckled fondly as he passed the bill to her to examine, then directed his attention back to me. "Lord Cedric worked alongside Jack, and I'm hopeful that a similar relationship can continue between you and Jack as well. He has been instrumental in formulating propositions such as this one."

"I hope for that as well." My chest swelled. Would it really be this simple?

"Call the scribes," Queen Isolde murmured. She had taken out a pair of spectacles and was perusing the bill. The page boy scurried off to deliver the message and I held my breath, nerves tingling.

King Wenceslas smiled. "No need to look so tense, Noelle. We will gladly sign this into law."

The guard gestured for me to exit, but I stayed rooted to the spot. "It's…it will be law? Just like that?"

"There are a few procedural steps we need to follow to have it incorporated and we will need to send out a proclamation, but within the week, yes. That's why we called the scribes. They will begin making copies to distribute."

My mouth flapped open. Valencia had been telling the truth? After everything I'd overcome to get to this point, it felt surreal to be told that it was a success.

Queen Isolde lowered her spectacles. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, I just…I thought it would take much longer."

"Your father already did all the hard work, and if you acquired the final signatures, all that is left is our own signatures and enacting the law. That is the easy part."

"It was my stepmother who secured the final signature, not me," I corrected him, ashamed that I'd been so suspicious of Valencia. She'd found Jack and me in a compromising situation and hadn't turned us in, even providing a way that Jack and I would be able to be together, and I'd treated her with nothing but suspicion and contempt. She deserved to have credit.

"No doubt she is a friend to all mages, just as your father was, then," the queen said kindly. "I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure of meeting Cedric's second wife. What's her name?"

"Valencia."

"Be sure to extend the gratitude of the entire royal family to her and let her know that I look forward to meeting her soon."

"I shall." I curtsied to each of them, hardly able to believe my luck, and allowed myself to be led away.

Still dazed by the success and the now very real possibility of a future with Jack, I sought out any of the clerks who were in charge of the girls entered in the competition. Against all odds, Valencia had proved that I could trust her about the bill to grant full rights to mages, and she said that she had the will ready for me.

I found Octavius at the same desk he'd been at when I first arrived, still buried in a mountain of paperwork. "Yes?" he intoned dully.

"I wish to withdraw my name from the competition," I told him clearly.

He looked up in surprise, his nose twitching and beady eyes staring. "Withdraw? After all the work I went to in order to secure you a private room?"

"Yes."

"Meaning you do *not* wish to attend the final ball tonight?"

"That's correct."

"Are you aware that if you do so, you will not be allowed to re-enter?"

"I am."

Octavius fixed me with a beady stare. "You say that, but did you know that the prince will likely make his selection for his future bride tonight?"

"Yes, I know that. I don't wish to be considered any longer."

"May I inquire as to why?"

"I think the prince would be better suited to another woman," I told him politely. "Prince Stephen is wonderful, but there just isn't a romantic connection between us. I'm sure he will understand."

His eyes popped. "You haven't spoken to the prince about it already? You're just planning to leave him?"

"I…I'll speak to him," I said. Truth be told, I hadn't thought much about it. I'd been so thrilled about the bill and the prospect of a future with Jack that I hadn't thought much about Stephen at all, but I supposed that I did owe it to him to tell him.

"If you withdraw, you won't be able to stay here any longer," Octavius informed me, shuffling a stack of papers and fixing me with a piercing stare. "You'll need to vacate the premises. I can't have superfluous guests clogging up the halls."

"I understand. I'll return to my home." I glowed as I said it. *My home*. I would be back where I'd been raised, and I would be able to run things the way I wanted, rather than the way my stepmother had insisted upon ever since marrying my father. I would be able to reopen the school and usher in a new era in which mages would be full and equal citizens.

"If you are absolutely certain—"

"I am," I said confidently, lifting my chin higher. "I'm certain."

"I don't want you to come back saying that you want to—"

"I won't. I have other plans." Joy swelled within my chest. The future was bright.

CHAPTER 14

When I knocked on my stepmother's door, I was surprised that she flung it open almost immediately, with no limp in her step at all.

"I see your ankle's better."

"Oh yes, by the time I walked back, it was much improved. I take it everything went well?"

"It did."

"Come in, come in!" Valencia waved me inside. Vallia and Vanessa were in the same exact spots as they had been when I'd passed by an hour before, hair still up in rollers as they carefully applied stain to their lips. Vanessa smiled, but Vallia kept her gaze fixed forward and didn't make eye contact. "So, the king accepted the proposal? What did he say?"

"He said it all looked to be in order and would become law within the week. I didn't expect it to move that quickly."

Valencia rolled her eyes. "After all that work Cedric put in, it feels like it has moved very slowly indeed."

"I suppose. But I had something else to tell you as well. I'm out of the competition. I stopped and saw Octavius on the way, so I'm here to collect the will you promised."

"But of course," Valencia said, baring her teeth in a smile that looked more like a wolf about to pounce on its prey. "I already

submitted additional copies to the scribes and records department last night. I kept the original for you."

"You gave copies to scribes already?" I asked, hesitantly stepping over the threshold. "How did you know I was going to withdraw so soon?"

"You seem like a trustworthy person. Here." With a flourish, my stepmother handed me a piece of parchment. "One will, just as promised."

My chest swelled as I began to read, but my insides soon froze and shriveled. "No," I whispered, eyes skating back and forth across the page, certain I had misread.

The Last Will and Testament of Cedric Frost

I, Cedric Frost, being of sound mind and memory, do hereby make, publish, and declare this to be my last will and testament, and I revoke all previous wills made by me.

Bequest to my Second Wife, Valencia Frost

I give, devise, and bequeath all of my estate, property, and monies to my second wife, Valencia Frost, for her to use at her discretion and whom I entrust to carry on my life's work.

Alternate Bequest to my Daughter Noelle

In the event that my second wife predeceases me or is unable to receive my estate for any reason, including but not limited to death, mental illness, or

incarceration, I direct that my entire estate shall instead pass to my daughter, Noelle Frost.

Signed,
Cedric Frost

"Is something wrong?" Valencia cooed, coming to curl her fingers on my shoulder. Her sharp, pointed nails reminded me of a vulture's talons grasping at its next meal.

"This isn't his will; this must be a forgery." I wrenched away from her. "He named me the sole inheritor. He told me."

"He told you that more than a year ago, darling. People—and their wills—can change."

"You tricked me!" I shouted, flinging the paper back at her.

She swatted it away. "I did not. I promised you that I would give you your father's will and I did. It isn't my fault it doesn't say what you thought it would. Like I told you before, you deserve this."

Vanessa, still seated behind her mother and primping before the mirror, laughed cruelly. I tried to catch Vallia's eye, but she busied herself with digging through a bag without ever extracting anything.

My chest tightened and withered; the entire world was collapsing. I was a fool for ever trusting Valencia. How could I have been so stupid?

"No ball for you," Vanessa crowed in delight. "No ball, no prince, and not even enough money to buy a dress. How does it feel? Even if you tried to marry your white-haired freak now, where would you live?"

"Don't," Vallia said quietly, but Vanessa ignored her.

"They'll have to live in his hovel of a dog barn," Vanessa went on. "Still sleeping with the dogs where they belong."

"Vanessa," Vallia began tentatively, but I couldn't bear it any longer. I turned on my heel and ran out, fuming.

"Good riddance!" Vanessa called after me. "If I see you when I'm queen, I'll wave!"

I stormed down the hall, resisting the urge to give the suit of armor a hearty kick. Had Valencia concealed the will from me before sheerly for the pleasure of dangling the possibility in front of me and watching me chase after a dream like trying to catch smoke in my bare hands? Was she truly so cruel that she and her daughters had schemed to have me withdraw by taunting me with something they knew I desperately wanted but would never have? Whether it was forged or not, she had already submitted copies of the will to scribes. She would be instated as the sole heir and now I had no way of reopening the school. What was the point in her delaying handing in the will when she knew it named her as the recipient?

When I reached the corridor outside the largest ballroom, I was jostled aside as a stream of servants flooded in and out of the open double doors, preparing for the final ball that night, the one I wouldn't be attending.

For a moment, I debated trying to find Octavius and asking if there was any way to put myself back into the competition. He had been very firm that once withdrawn, there was no re-entering, though. Besides, what would I gain by returning? I didn't want to marry Stephen, and toying with his emotions any longer simply to spite my stepmother was something I wasn't willing to do. I clutched at the windowsill, staring out at the snow-covered landscape. The edge of the lake was just barely visible from the window. That was where Jack and I had skated together. Now, there was nothing. Nothing on the lake, nothing to aid my school, nothing on the horizon, and nothing in my future.

I cursed myself for being so naïve. None of this made sense. True, if Valencia hadn't offered the bill to legalize marriage to mages, I wouldn't have withdrawn from the competition. Had she used my attraction to Jack as an advantage to deter me from doing my best in the competition? If so, she had succeeded very well. I hated knowing that she had manipulated me so easily. Her words from before echoed back to haunt me. *You don't need to trust me; trust your feelings for Jack*. I had done so, and she had played me like a fiddle.

"Noelle!"

I turned, hoping to see Jack. How I needed to talk to him.

Prince Stephen strode toward me, concern etched into every line of his face. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head from side to side. "Nothing. I'm fine. I was just…looking for Jack."

Stephen studied my face. "Why do you want to see him right now? Don't you need to get ready for tonight?"

So, he didn't know yet. "I withdrew my name from consideration," I told him, trying my best to keep my voice level. "They said I wouldn't be able to attend the ball."

Stephen took a step back. "Why? Have I done something to offend you?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. It's just…it's complicated."

"You miss your son?"

I sighed. I'd completely forgotten about our mix-up. "I don't have a son, Stephen. Kody is my dog's name. It was all a misunderstanding."

Stephen's face worked as he tried to understand. "If you don't want to leave, I can speak with my advisors. I can get you a special invitation. *I* don't want you to leave."

"Stephen—*Prince* Stephen. You're wonderful, but I…I don't feel the same way about you."

"We're friends, aren't we?"

"We are, but I have feelings for someone else," I admitted quietly. "I'm so sorry."

Surprisingly, Stephen didn't look upset. If anything, he seemed sympathetic. "It's Jack, isn't it?" he said with a small smile.

My stomach flipped. "Why do you ask?" I asked in a rush, my insides knotting with anxiety. Was the law already in effect to protect us if our secret romance was brought to light? Would Jack get into trouble if Stephen knew his advisor was flirting with one of the girls meant for the prince's own choosing?

"I've never seen him so happy before. He's usually very grouchy, you know. I can almost stand to be around him now." His eyes sparkled mischievously. They were blue, but much darker and not nearly as vivid as Jack's.

I stared at the floor, so well-polished that I could see my reflection in the glossy stone.

"Jack isn't here right now," Stephen said, reading my mind just as easily as if my thoughts were written across my forehead. "He left for some business in the next town over, but I know he planned to be at the ball tonight. I know he'd want to see you."

The corner of my mouth quirked up. "I suppose I could try to make it if I don't get run out."

"Please do," Stephen said. "I want you there, too. I'll make all the arrangements. You won't need to leave."

Assured that I would indeed be able to stay at least for the ball, I returned to the suite where I had been staying, only to furrow my brow at what I saw. Maids were bustling in and out of the room, carrying armloads of bedding.

"What's going on?"

One of the youngest of the maids caught my eye and blushed, mouth flapping open and closed like a fish out of water.

"Oh, I'm sorry, miss, but we were told you left."

"There was a slight change of plans." I poked my head inside to examine the stripped room. "Where are my things?"

"Your sister and mother told us that you wanted them shipped to Frostwood Estate immediately. Your bag left half an hour ago."

My mouth hung open. "But…the ball," I squeaked.

"I'm sure you could borrow a dress from one of your sisters," the youngest maid piped up. "My sisters let me borrow their clothes all the time."

A pained smile stretched my features. "We don't have that sort of relationship. Can I just have my room back?"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question," came a wheezy voice from behind me. Octavius shuffled the ream of parchment he always held,

then wiped his pointed nose, smudging an ink stain across it. He looked more like a rat than ever.

"Why not?"

"According to the documentation your stepmother provided me, although you are the late Lord Cedric Frost's daughter, you have no claim to his estate and are therefore title-less and unable to be given the same rights and privileges as those girls who are here at the crown's invitation."

"Prince Stephen told me I could attend. Ask him."

"But he is not the one who assigns room and board. I am, and I say no. If the prince has given his permission for you to attend the ball this evening, you are welcome to attend, but until then, I must ask you to leave now or I shall have to call the guards."

Half of me wanted to challenge him and wait for the guards to physically escort me out of the castle. I couldn't believe that the royal family was so uncaring that they would throw me out. I cast an eye out at the swirling grey clouds. There was no way I could go out in that. Besides, my few belongings had been sent back to Frostwood Estate. I had no cloak, no furs, no wrap…nothing to keep me even remotely warm.

"Now, now, Octavius, don't be so harsh." The sycophantic voice of my stepmother set my blood to rising. My jaw locked so hard I was surprised my teeth didn't grind into powder. Valencia came down the hall, with Vallia right behind her, wringing her hands and biting her lip. Valencia's absurdly high heels clicked closer as she lowered her voice to a purr. "I'd be glad to have her come stay with us. She is family, after all. Besides, my girls need someone they trust to help them get ready while they finish preparing for the ball tonight. What do you say, Noelle? I'm happy to take you in. I've always been a charitable woman."

"So kind," one of the maids sighed.

This time, I was the one avoiding looking at Vallia, whose eyes begged me to accept her mother's offer.

My vision turned red. I hated everything about Valencia, from the way she was able to manipulate people to her obsession with her looks. How dare she offer to reduce me to a handmaiden and act as

though it was a saintly gift of benevolence? Leaning close to my stepmother, I snarled, "I'd rather freeze to death in a blizzard."

Valencia's face never changed, but gasps of shock came from Octavius and the maids. "How ungrateful," I heard one of them whisper.

"Out, out, out!" Octavius barked, bustling along and shooing me down the corridor by flapping his hands. "Out this moment! I'll be reporting this, you know! You aren't allowed back inside the castle until the ball tonight! Out!"

I was beyond caring what they thought of me. I despised how Valencia was always able to get people to think she was some gracious lady when all the makeup and hair styling did was hide the hideous woman she was. If I had to be thrown out into the cold, at least I wouldn't have to accept the false charity of the woman who'd deluded my father into believing she could ever be trusted.

Holding my head high, I turned on my heel and marched away. If Vallia was trying to be kind, she had failed. She was too afraid to stand up for herself and others; I couldn't count on her being of any help to me. I vowed to never be like her—so frightened of confronting injustices that I stood by and apathetically allowed wrongs to be doled out. It was the same thing that happened to so many of the citizens who were happy to let mages be discriminated against as long as it didn't affect them. But not me.

The short walk from the castle's side courtyard to the dog barn was enough to make my teeth chatter and my entire body shiver from the cold. When I tried the handle of Jack's room adjoining the barn, I found it locked fast. Icicles, he must have secured it when he left, assuming I had another place to stay.

Back to the barn I went, and I sat, fuming, in one of the stalls while Kodiak worked his nose between my side and arm, tongue lolling to the side. Cinder came and put her paws on my lap, soiling my already dirty dress even more.

"So much for being able to wear this to the ball," I told them, watching as dirt continued to spread over the gown. Cinder let out a low howl and sniffed enthusiastically, tail wagging frantically as Kodiak lifted his head to lick my chin. Unable to stay angry while

surrounded by such unconditional love, the corners of my mouth lifted, and I rubbed their ears.

Jack must have taken the rest of the team, for Kodiak and Cinder were the only dogs in the barn. It was unusually quiet without all the howls and barks, and as I stared at the ceiling, Kodiak and Cinder closed their eyes in contentment.

I couldn't sleep. How could I, when I didn't even know where I would be this time tomorrow? The uncertainty of my future gnawed at me, reminding me time and again of the reasons I resented my stepfamily. I couldn't live at a school that was shut down, I'd been thrown out of the castle's lodgings, and the estate I thought I would inherit had passed to someone else. There was no space in my head to worry about some silly ball. I was homeless in the middle of winter.

"—would be in here if I had to guess." The sound of that wheezy, nasally voice set my teeth on edge as the doors to the barn opened. Instantly, Cinder and Kodiak awoke and barked at the newcomer.

The sound of guards clanking over made my heart lurch. Surely they wouldn't throw me out into the snow.

"Aha." Octavius's rat-like face popped over the side of the stall. "I knew we'd find you here. Your stepmother was right."

"Jack told me I could be here," I told him, my jaw set and eyes narrowed.

"As I told you before, neither Jack nor Prince Stephen are in charge of room and board. I am, and I say you need to vacate the premises."

"Have a heart," one of the guards told him in a low voice. "It's freezing out there and traveling on foot would be impossible. At least give her a coach."

The other guard, a fatherly-looking man, nodded in agreement. "She doesn't even have a cloak."

Octavius wrinkled his nose so he looked like a mouse who'd just been offered moldy cheese. "Very well. I shall provide a coach to the village. Come along."

I was left with no choice. "Come on, Kody," I called, but Octavius held up his hand.

"The dog stays."

"But he's mine!"

"He looks exactly like several of the others."

"Ask Jack! Jack can tell them apart."

"And I shall ask Jack about it when he gets back, but he isn't here right now. Until I'm certain that you aren't stealing one of the royal advisor's team dogs—"

"This is ridiculous," I huffed under my breath. "Can I at least leave him a note?"

"No." The smug satisfaction on Octavius's face made me wish I stood a foot taller and was a hundred pounds heavier. "I'll call for the coach now."

Within five minutes, I was handed into a coach and shipped off to the village. I stared out the window, wondering what on earth I was supposed to do now. I had no way to return to the castle, my only dress was a complete mess, and Jack would have no way of knowing where I was.

The coachman pulled the horses to a stop then jumped down and opened the door. "Here you are, miss," he said cheerfully. "Best get indoors before this blizzard hits."

"Can you tell Jack I'm here?" I asked desperately. I certainly couldn't trust my stepfamily or Octavius to tell him. "Please."

"Tell him you're where? Which house?"

I stared around and my gaze settled on Beryl's shop. "That one. The healer's."

"If I see him, I'll pass the message on. Good day, miss." The coachman hopped back to his seat and with a crack of his whip, he was off.

CHAPTER 15

I trudged through the snow and knocked on Beryl's door, praying that he would answer. A minute dragged by, and I knocked again, folding my arms so tightly I felt like a knotted rope. It should be illegal for anywhere to get this cold. This time, pattering footsteps could be heard, and the door creaked open. A young girl stood there, eyes shining bright. "Hello."

"Hello. Is your father home?"

"He's helping someone. Can I take a message?"

I shivered all over, the frigid air stabbing right through me to chill my very bones. "Can you tell him that Noelle's here?"

"Noelle?" Beryl's deep voice came from the backroom. "Come in, come in! Don't let the warm air out. Is Jack with you?"

The girl waved me inside, and I stamped hard to get the worst of the snow off the hem of my skirts before I quickly crossed the threshold and snapped the door closed. "No, he isn't," I answered.

Beryl stuck his head out of the backroom. "He tends to just randomly turn up with dogs. And then with the occasional girl," he added with a wink. Then his face changed when he saw my expression. "What's wrong?"

The higher the moon rose and the longer I talked, the lower my heart sank. I spilled my entire story to Beryl and his nine-year-old daughter Peggy. Had Jack already found out that I'd been thrown out? I had no doubt that my stepmother would rush to tell him that I'd been using him all along, trying to exploit him to get a will that would avail me nothing. I could only imagine the stories that Vanessa would tell Stephen. I buried my face into my hands. One of these days, I really should learn to keep my mouth shut so I didn't land myself in these situations.

"It's not so bad," Beryl told me, heaving a crate of bottles over to the counter. "Jack can talk to the prince and ensure you have a place to live, and you're welcome to stay here tonight. You'll just miss a ball. You and Jack can go skate again and pretend like it's dancing, and it will be like you didn't miss anything at all."

"That's not…how did you know we went skating?"

Beryl shrugged his massive shoulders. "Jack let it slip the other day. You make him really happy, you know."

I smiled wistfully. "He makes me happy, too."

Peggy sat attentively by his side, as if determined to show that she could be just as gown-up as her father. Trying to find something to talk about besides my own woes, I smiled at the girl. "What hobbies do you have, Peggy? Do you like helping your father with his shop?"

"I'm going to be an actress one day," she told me proudly. "Dad says I'm very good."

"Really? Have you been to the theater before?"

"Yes. I went once, but it was all about puns." She looked me dead in the eye. "It was just a play on words."

Beryl hooted with laughter, slapping his knee. "That was a good one, Pegs!"

I groaned and shook my head. "No one will ever question if she is your daughter."

He wiped tears of mirth from his eyes, sighing as his laughter slowly died. "It's time for you to go to bed, Pegs."

"Dad, please can I stay up for a little longer? I want to hear more."

"Not unless you want to clean the shop while you stay up."

Peggy grumbled and dragged her feet as slowly as possible toward the back room, but then she stopped, listening hard. The jingling of bells rang through the air. Daring to hope, I snuck a look out the window. A team of sled dogs, all harnessed together, was pulling to a stop. Out leapt Jack, hair just as white as Kodiak's fur. He tucked a large box under one arm and kept his other hand cupped just beneath his ribs at an awkward angle.

I ran to the door, pulling it open just as Jack tried to knock, and he overbalanced, tumbling into the room in a whirl of snow. The box tumbled from Jack's arms and skidded across the floor as Jack wrapped both arms protectively around his middle, resulting in his face crashing into my knees.

"Jack!" I shrieked, bending to help him up.

"Careful," he warned as he stood, still a bit hunched with his arms cradling his suspiciously large jacket.

"By holly, if that's *another* dog you want me to patch up—" Beryl began, his bearded face contorting into an irritable scowl as he went to shut the door against the blustering wind.

"It's not hurt this time," Jack protested, gently peeling back his topmost layer. A small, orange head popped out, sniffing curiously. The puppy's eyes sparkled like amber and its tiny, pointed ears stuck straight up from its head. "I just found him."

"He's so cute!" Peggy squealed in delight and stroked his head.

"He is," I agreed. "I think I'm in love."

"Whoa, whoa, if you two are going to talk like that, I'm leaving," Beryl snorted. "And Peggy, I told you to go to bed."

Peggy wrinkled her nose. "She meant she loves the dog."

"What, now she's trying to hurt Jack's feelings by picking a dog over him?" Beryl smirked. "He'll be very jealous."

"No, I won't. I'd pick a dog over myself any day," Jack said, joining me in scratching behind the puppy's ears.

"Can I hold him?" Peggy asked eagerly, arms outstretched.

"Pegs, if I have to tell you to go to bed one more time—" Beryl began.

"I'm going, I'm going," Peggy huffed, dropping her arms. As she plodded out of the room, she added under her breath, "I never get to do anything fun."

Beryl closed the door behind her while I scooped the puppy out of Jack's coat and cradled him against my chest. Instantly, the puppy turned his head back to try and gnaw on my hand, his sharp little baby teeth poking at my skin. "What a cute little pumpkin."

Beryl rolled his eyes but then spoiled the effect by waggling his eyebrows at Jack. "If you're going to give her a cute nickname in return, I recommend doing so quietly so I don't lose my supper."

"Oh, get out of here."

"I live here!"

Jack widened his eyes at Beryl. "I would like to talk to Noelle, please. *Alone*."

"Oooooh, it's *that* kind of talk, is it?"

"Yeah. So, unless you want to lose your supper…"

"Point taken, point taken. I should go tuck Peggy in, which will leave you two very alone so you can declare your secret confessions of lo—"

"By holly," Jack snorted, shoving his friend between the shoulder blades until Beryl was pushed into the back of the shop, then pivoted back to face me, shutting the door as he did so.

"Oh, you sweet pumpkin," Beryl called from behind the door in a falsetto voice. "You are just too scrumptious."

"Dad!" I heard Peggy call. "What are you talking about?"

The direction of Beryl's voice shifted. "You're supposed to be in bed!"

I laughed, still holding the small orange dog and digging my fingers through his fluffy fur as he continued to chew on anything he could get his jaws around.

"I'm sorry about Beryl," Jack said with a small smile.

"No need for apologies about a friend with such an outstanding sense of humor," I told him, eyes twinkling.

"Ha!" Beryl bellowed.

"I'm really glad to see you," I told Jack, trying to pitch my voice low enough that Beryl wouldn't hear.

Apparently, I hadn't tried hard enough. "Now you say, *I'm glad to see you too, Noelle. Marry me right now,*" Beryl prompted in an absurd stage whisper.

"Why are you whispering into the keyhole, Dad?"

Jack placed his hand on the door's handle and let out a blast of wintery air that shot through the keyhole. A yelp from the other side was followed by Peggy's snickering. "Your face is all covered in ice! I think he was up to *snow* good!"

Jack glanced out the window at the moonlit sky. "I hurried as fast as I could, but when I got to the castle, Octavius said you were sent away and a coachman tipped me off that you were here. But I'm here now; come to the ball with me."

"There's no point in going," I said glumly. "I withdrew from the competition, and the school's license expires at midnight."

"There are still a few hours left. You can talk to Stephen and the king and queen about re-opening the school. I can get you an audience with them."

"I would, but I don't have anything to wear," I protested.

"Whoa, hey, what *are* you two talking about?" Beryl called out. "My daughter is in this house, you know!"

"And she will never go to sleep if you keep bellowing like a wounded rhinoceros!" Jack hissed, then turned back to me.

"I can't wear this to a royal ball," I told him, looking down at the stained and dirty dress I wore.

"Your wish is my command," Jack said, stooping to pick up the box that he'd dropped when he first came in and opening it with a flourish. Inside was the beautiful blue gown with the white fur wrap I'd admired so much in the shop window.

"Jack," I breathed. "You shouldn't have."

"I wanted to. The heiress of the Frostwood estate should have something nice to wear."

My shoulders slumped. "I was wrong," I confessed. "Valencia showed me—my father named her the beneficiary, not me."

Jack blinked in surprise. "What?"

"She's the heiress, not me. I have nothing."

Jack recovered quickly. "That's not true. You have me," he said.

"Good line, Jack, good line. Now kiss her," came Beryl's voice.

"I swear I'm going to freeze you until spring," Jack threatened, then reached for my hand. "I'm begging you to come with me. If I have to listen to him any longer, I literally will die."

I clasped his warm hands. "We can't have that now."

Jack stepped out while I changed, and when I allowed him back in, I slowly spun in a circle. "How do I look?"

Beryl, who had followed Jack in, slapped his friend on the shoulder. "He only has *ice* for you."

I beamed.

"Don't forget your little pumpkin," Beryl added, nodding at the round ball of fuzz on the other side of the room. "He looks strong enough to pull your sleigh all by himself."

The puppy padded across the floor, one of Peggy's shoes in his mouth while his tiny puff of a tail whipped from side to side. Jack scooped him up and tucked him into his jacket. "My lady," he said to me, bowing with one hand placed firmly under the puppy so it looked like he had a paunchy belly. "Your dog sled awaits."

CHAPTER 16

The ride to the castle flashed by, which was a good thing. I had to all but bury myself under the blankets; the snowstorm was quickly becoming a blizzard. While I hid from the snow, Jack told me ways I might be able to persuade Stephen to still give funding to the school. My feeble protests about ruining Stephen's final ball were quickly dismissed by Jack pointing out that there were always more balls that could be hosted, but the license expiring would set the school back years and I would have to start from scratch. But if the license was renewed, even if I didn't have the inheritance, there were other avenues I could pursue to continue the school's operation. Jack had to shout to be heard over the howling of the wind, and his dogs occasionally got confused about what commands he issued them and which were comments intended for me.

Ice frosted my eyelashes and hair by the time we finally pulled to a standstill at the castle steps. "You've got this," Jack encouraged me. "Talk to him. It will all work out. I'm going to put the dogs away, then I'll meet you inside as soon as I can."

I nodded and got out, watching as he called to his dogs to zip off toward the dog barn on the far end of the castle grounds.

"Noelle Frost?" one of the guards asked when I got inside.

"That's me."

"Every girl must wear the assigned shoes in order to enter," he intoned dully, handing me a box containing the ice slippers Jack had shown me before. "Once you remove them, you are to leave the ballroom immediately."

I took them, hating how they instantly warmed at my touch. I glanced at the guard, who raised an eyebrow suspiciously. Jack's confidence in his spell work had to be misplaced. *One dance,* I told myself. *One dance to plead for the school, then I'll take the shoes off. They're wrong. I don't love Stephen.*

When I entered the ballroom, the babble of voices and music from the orchestra swirled around me. Stephen stood there in a crisp black suit, talking to Vallia, who was managing to wear her ice slippers without even the slightest wince. The few other girls left were not as successful at disguising their discomfort and kept shifting their weight from side to side as their feet slowly froze.

The moment I crossed to him, Stephen disengaged himself from Vallia's conversation and came to my side. "You look beautiful," he breathed. From over his shoulder, Octavius frowned and inclined his head to listen to Valencia, who was seated in a chair at the edge of the dance floor with narrowed eyes.

"Thank you," I told him politely, then drew a deep breath. "May I speak with you?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. There is something very important I'd like to discuss with you."

Soon I would be just as uncomfortable as those girls who winced with every step, even though my slippers didn't feel cold. Stephen led me onto the dance floor. "I'm glad you're here, Noelle."

"Prince Stephen," I began, but he interrupted me.

"Just Stephen is fine."

"*Prince* Stephen," I went on, placing extra emphasis on his title. "I need to let you know that I'm not nobility any longer. My father's estate was passed to someone else."

"I don't mind. I can talk to Octavius if he's bothering you about it."

"That's not the point. I didn't come here to participate again," I told him, determined to be as transparent as possible. "I came to ask for aid for the school I run for young mages. Without my inheritance, we have no funding and I won't be able to pay the license renewal fee."

Stephen's face remained impassive. "That could possibly be arranged, depending on…certain circumstances."

My hand stiffened where I held his shoulder. He didn't seem the sort to expect a woman to marry him in exchange for financial favors, but I wasn't sure what else he could mean. I threw a glance around for Jack. He would be able to help me sort it out. The dog yard was on the opposite end of the castle's grounds, but he had to get here at some point.

"I know you have feelings for Jack," Stephen said quietly, as if he had read my thoughts. "My father said the bill you brought will be put into effect soon. Octavius already told me about the issue with your inheritance."

Of course he had ratted me out. Stupid Octavius.

"I looked into the will that was provided to our scribes," Stephen went on, "and it is perfectly legal. Your stepmother is the rightful heiress according to your father's will."

"Which is why the school needs funding," I persisted, pleading in my voice. "I wouldn't ask for myself, but my stepmother won't help; she was the one who shut down the school. If you're friends with Jack, you will know how important it is for all mages to be educated and given equal opportunities."

"Did you come here simply to ask for funding for the school?" Stephen asked. He was being watched closely by all the other women in the hall. Only Vallia, Vanessa, and I were able to walk without grimacing in pain, though I had no idea how Vanessa was managing it. Even as Stephen danced with me, one of the other girls

finally let out a gasp and removed the ice slippers, then walked out of the hall, shoulders slumped in defeat. He looked down at where my ice slippers occasionally peeked out from under my gown. "I thought we were friends."

"We *are* friends. But my school's license expires at midnight. I know it is poor timing and I do apologize for that. If I could just speak with you further about—"

"I'd like to take you to speak with my parents," he said. "Before Jack gets here."

I couldn't imagine that Stephen would propose after I'd made my feelings so plain. "Speak about…what?"

"About our futures. About your school. Everything. I think we have a lot to talk about."

Our futures? My panic grew. His parents would be waiting for Stephen to announce which girl he wanted to marry. "We could talk about the school here."

"I'd prefer not." Stephen leaned closer to my ear. "If you haven't noticed, I'm being stared at by several other women like I'm their next meal." He returned to his original position. "Besides, my parents are already expecting us."

"B-b-but," I stammered, trying to come up with an excuse that would allow me to stay and wait for Jack.

"It won't take long," Stephen assured me, steering me through the crowd until we were able to step into the corridor. Behind us, another girl threw off her ice slippers and sat down to rub her chilled toes. Within seconds, Octavius had descended upon her, shooing her toward the exit.

I clung to the hope that Stephen only wanted to discuss funding the school. I would gladly talk about that. If he had other ideas in mind, I wasn't sure what I would do.

My feet stayed warm, but my hands grew icy as Stephen led me to a chamber where the king and queen were talking excitedly with each other, broad smiles on each of their faces. They looked up eagerly when we entered the room.

"Noelle, dear!" the queen cried, rising to embrace me. "Stephen told us everything and we're thrilled."

That didn't sound like a proposal to fund a school for mages, especially when I'd only just told him about it a few minutes ago. I shot a terrified look at Stephen, who smiled and nodded.

The king took my hands into his. "I'm very sorry to hear of the inheritance issues you've been dealing with, but rest assured that such matters can be easily resolved. Title or no title, you've won my son's heart, and we would be honored to have you as part of our family."

Chills erupted all over my body. I couldn't marry Stephen, I couldn't. I wouldn't. My mouth flapped uselessly. "I…I…" My throat refused to swallow, and my mouth became dry as paper. "I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding. I'm honored, but—"

"There's no misunderstanding," Stephen said. "You discussed the situation with Jack, didn't you? He brought you back, so we can announce everything."

The harsh reality of my circumstances crashed around my ears as the entire world dissolved. Despite what I'd told him, did Stephen think I'd returned for *him*? I couldn't stay. I had to get away, now. How could I explain that I'd somewhat led Stephen on just to be near his advisor, who was forbidden from courting me, so he could help me investigate false claims—then begged for money for a school that had been shut down?

The glass doors that led to the courtyard beyond were closed tight, and snow swirled past in thick flurries that blocked out everything. If it weren't for the warmth of my dress and shoes, I'd have been quite cold. The shoes, I thought in a panic. I'd become so distracted that I'd forgotten to take them off. Hastily, I tried to wiggle my toes to get the shoes off, but they were fitted too well.

Stephen noticed and frowned slightly. "What're you doing?"

"The shoes, they just feel so cold," I said quickly, wishing for once that Octavius was near so he could satisfy his rule-abiding heart and have me thrown out. "I…I can't handle it anymore."

His frown deepened. "But you looked comfortable wearing them. You didn't even seem to notice."

"My stepsisters are still wearing them," I pointed out, finally managing to get one of the slippers off. It tinkled to the floor. "Vallia

and Vanessa. You ought to talk to them." Anything to get away.

"Noelle, don't leave. Please stay."

"No," I whispered. "Your Highness, truly I'm honored that you think so highly of me, but I can't marry you."

"If you just wait—" the king began.

"I can't!" I burst out. "I'm sorry to have led you on, Stephen, honestly I am. But even if we're friends, I don't love you and it wouldn't be fair to either of us if we were married."

"But, Noelle—" He tried to take my hand again just as the clock began to strike midnight. The license was expired. There was nothing else I could do. I pulled my hands out of Stephen's grip and left the ice slipper on the floor without taking the time to cast off the second. I would find Jack in the dog yard.

"I need to go," I said in a rush before I fumbled for the courtyard door's handle and turned it. A blast of wintery air pelted everyone inside. The queen shrieked and the king shielded her from the blinding snow as I ran into the blizzard beyond.

"Noelle, stop!" Stephen called. "Your shoe!"

I didn't stop. Blizzard or not, I wasn't going to stay and let Stephen announce an engagement that I didn't want.

CHAPTER 17

The ravenous wind tore at my hair and face, lashing against every bit of exposed skin it could find. I hated the sole remaining ice slipper that warmed my foot. They were wrong. Jack's magic had chosen incorrectly. I didn't love Stephen. We were friends, nothing more. I'd never resented a mage's magic so much. It could have landed me in an unwanted marriage.

Every muscle screamed for relief as I pushed through the unyielding force of the blizzard, trying to find the dog yard in the blinding snow. My fur wrap fluttered like some tattered and useless flag, flapping wildly around me and making me struggle for balance. Snow drove down in sheets, a relentless curtain of white that swallowed the world around me and made it impossible to see the path ahead. I couldn't even see the lighted windows of the castle anymore. How was I supposed to navigate my way across the castle to the dog yard if I couldn't even tell where I was?

Shuddering from the cold and regretting my hasty flight, I turned back but to my dismay, couldn't see anything. With each step forward the wind buffeted me two or three steps backward or to the side, disorienting me more than ever.

Fear clutching at my stomach, I tried to feel around for anything —a statue, a stone wall, a hedge—but found nothing. As I waved my hand, searching for anything to hold, the wind caught hold of my fur

wrap and ripped it from my shoulders; it was gone within the second it took me to turn around.

"No!" I collapsed in the snow, arms wrapped uselessly around my shoulders, too numb with cold to go any farther. It didn't matter if one of my feet was warm if the rest of me was frozen solid. If I couldn't see, no one would be able to find me either. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. I was going to freeze to death because I had been naïve enough to think I could cross the castle's courtyard during a whiteout. The longer I huddled in on myself, the fiercer the wind blew, until I was so cold I couldn't think of anything else.

"Noelle!" The faint cry floated toward me, almost immediately snuffed out by the punishing gusts of wind.

I tried to find my voice to shout back, but each sound I attempted was swept away with the swirling snow. I squinted for the person who'd called me, but my vision was obscured by the frost that coated my eyelashes, and the cold bit through my dress as easily as if it'd been made of netting.

"Noelle!" It sounded like Jack, and he was getting closer. My heart leapt.

I struggled to sit up and did my best to call out to him, but each sound I made was closer to the noise a dying cat might have made and in no way resembled his name. Despite my inability to shout, a dark shape formed in the whiteness until the snow parted to reveal Jack. He held his ungloved hands outstretched, keeping the snow at bay as he ran toward me. "Noelle!"

I sank back down, energy spent. I was found.

For the first time since I'd known him, Jack looked truly angry. "What did you run away for?" he shouted, his voice loud enough to compete with the blizzard's howling wind. "Didn't you know it was dangerous?"

It proved impossible get my lips or jaw to work enough to give an answer. Frost coated my face, and each sharp breath burned painfully in my chest. Could this icy wind shred my lungs? It certainly felt that way.

"Whatever your reason, that was stupid," he scolded. With a wave of his hand, a thick ice shelter rose around us, strong enough

to block the wind. The domed ceiling was so low that I wouldn't have been able to stand properly, but at least the wind was unable to sneak in and steal my breath. Stiffly, I did my best to rub my numb fingers together.

"You could have died!" Jack continued, glaring for all he was worth. "What if I hadn't found you? People can freeze to death in less than an hour. If Stephen hadn't found me and sent me after you…"

"I c-couldn't marry S-Stephen. There was n-nothing left for me at the b-ball," I stammered, still shuddering all over.

"What am I, chopped dog meat? *I* want you." He didn't look at me while he placed his hand on the snow that was almost knee deep. It instantly melted away, almost like it was being absorbed back into his palm. "I thought my feelings were clear."

If I hadn't feared that tears would have turned to shards of ice, I might have cried. "I didn't w-want you to get into trouble. If p-people found out about us…"

"They already knew. We weren't exactly hiding it very well. Besides, it's legal now, or at least it will be in a few days, remember? There was no need to run away." Once all the snow was gone from the inside of the shelter, Jack let out several long breaths and crouched next to where I was huddled.

"C-can you stop the blizzard?" If there was a break in the blizzard, we would be able to return to the castle and warm up.

Jack slowly shook his head. "I'm not that powerful. I can create snow and ice and make some disappear, but I can't stop this much. Why did you run? I told you I would come and help you plead your case."

"Stephen took me to see the king and queen and they were talking about marrying him. I got scared," I admitted quietly. "I didn't think."

"That was obvious," he grouched, then his tone softened. He hesitantly brushed his knuckles over my cheek. "Are you still cold?" The clear, icy blue of his eyes overpowered everything else and left me speechless. How could anyone ever look at him and *not* be rendered breathless?

"Only a….a lot," I stammered, trying not to let my teeth chatter too badly or my breath escape in too ragged of a fashion.

"Here," he offered, opening his coat and guiding my arms in to wrap around his warm chest. I fought against my shivering as best I could and failed spectacularly. I curled my numb fingers into the fabric of his shirt, burying my face against his chest as he wrapped the coat around my back, enclosing both of us in his warmth.

"Are you c-c-cold?" I stammered.

"I don't get cold," he firmly reminded me, tightening his arms around me. After a moment, he redoubled his hold on me, squeezing me so tightly I couldn't breathe. "When I realized you were gone, I've never been more scared in my life." His breath warmed my neck. "Don't ever do that again."

His body radiated heat in waves so intoxicating that I closed my eyes, the better to soak in the warmth. I breathed a sigh of relief and cuddled closer, burrowing against Jack and marveling at how perfectly we fit together. His fingers caressed my back, applying just enough pressure that I was kept locked into the coat with him. Secured against his chest, I felt safe. Jack would protect me from the blizzard. He would protect me against anything.

"This feels familiar," Jack murmured.

"I don't remember ever hunkering down in an ice house with you before," I laughed shakily.

"No, but there was this one time when I was hiding in a closet with this beautiful woman. I was thinking of that."

"How scandalous."

"It was." Several quiet moments passed as my shivering slowly subsided. "Why didn't you stay?" Jack asked. This time, his voice was nearly a whisper. His warm, peppermint-scented breath was a welcome change from the frigid storm I'd been enduring.

"I don't want to marry the prince," I answered sleepily. The heat from Jack's body was making me drowsy. "I don't love him."

"I know." Jack's comforting voice was the last thing I heard before I drifted off to sleep, but before I lost complete consciousness, I felt his lips press against my forehead.

I didn’t love the prince. I loved Jack. I loved him with my whole heart.

Jack held me all night long while I slept. He must have dozed off too, because when I awoke, we were curled together, wrapped in his coat as one. Jack’s back was against the ice wall he’d conjured, arms still wrapped tightly around me. The ice building had been sealed off completely, and without the snow on the ground, it felt surprisingly warm. I closed my eyes again and relaxed in Jack’s embrace, listening to his deep, steady breathing and wishing the moment would never end.

Slowly, the interior of the ice structure grew lighter. The sun must have risen, because the velvety darkness soon gave way to a thin, pale blue that made the ice appear translucent. Jack shifted, his arm tightening around my waist briefly before he let out a sleepy snuffle. I scrunched my eyes shut, clinging to the last moments of tranquility before he awoke.

“Are you still wearing the other ice slipper?”

His question wasn’t what I’d been expecting, and I looked down at where the lone slipper peeked out from beneath my gown.

“I…no,” I lied quickly, trying to surreptitiously kick it off beneath my skirts. If Jack discovered that they had turned warm for me… Breaking free from the warm embrace of Jack’s arms, I extracted myself from the coat then reached over and nudged the slipper away. “It’s been bothering me all night. It was so cold.”

Jack sat up and picked up the shoe, then stared at me. “It’s warm.” I couldn’t read his expression. Was he disappointed? Upset? From inside his jacket, he pulled out the other shoe. “Try them both on.”

I reluctantly slid my feet into the shoes. “They must have warmed up because their maker is here.” I held my breath, waiting

to hear what Jack had to say.

"You love the prince," Jack said in wonderment.

"No, I don't!"

Jack met my eyes. "I think you do."

"No, I don't! I love you!"

There. The words that I'd so desperately wanted to speak were finally out in the open. They hovered in the air, drawing me to Jack. He had to know how strong my feelings were. "I love you, Jack," I repeated, my hands rising to latch onto his face. My thumb stroked his jawline, and the brief contact acted as a catalyst, fanning my emotions into a bonfire. Unable to resist, I leaned in and brushed my lips against his. The second they touched, I knew one kiss wouldn't be enough. I wanted so much more than a fleeting romance. I wanted a future with Jack.

He kissed me back, then pulled away and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Don't you see, Noelle? *I* am a prince."

I froze. "What? No, you're not." My brain had jammed, incapable of processing anything else.

"Only one who has feelings for a prince of this kingdom can wear the slippers without suffering frostbite."

"But…you told me your mother died and your father left you."

He shrugged apologetically. "That is the story I've been telling everyone my whole life, but it isn't true. Stephen and I are twins."

My mouth fell open. "But…people would have known."

"Only the physician and the midwives knew, and my parents paid them handsomely to keep it a secret. With the laws the way they were at the time of my birth, they knew I could have been taken away. So instead, they put out the same story I told you, and everyone accepted it without question. My parents knew I'd never be accepted as a prince. They've worked hard to amend the laws to legalize magic since I was born, but the sentiment toward mages has been more difficult to change. It isn't prudent for a nation to be governed by a leader whom no one trusts. It just made sense to have Stephen fill the role I could not."

"But you said you were older than he is."

"By seven and a half minutes, yes."

Twins. Jack's noticeably mage-like appearance had distracted from the other features that, now that I thought about it, did somewhat resemble Prince Stephen's. They had similar eyebrow shapes, though Jack's were white and therefore less visible than Stephen's heavy black ones. They both had a dimple on the same place on their cheek and their heights were within an inch of the other.

"At least your parents never would've had any trouble telling you apart," I joked, still in shock over the revelation.

"We have some familial resemblance, but we aren't identical twins. One of us could've easily been a girl."

"You're a prince," I said slowly, still unsure if I truly believed it.

"We planned to tell you last night. Stephen was supposed to bring you to my parents and I was going to do a grand reveal in front of you and the whole family, but it took longer than I expected to get the dogs put away, then you thought he was about to propose and ran away."

I jabbed my finger into his chest. "In my defense, he certainly made it seem that way. If he'd wanted to keep me there, he could have just told me he wanted to hear about the school or something. I would have gladly stayed to talk about that."

Jack laughed. "That would have been much more effective. If only he'd thought of that. He was in a full-on panic when he had to tell me that he'd scared you away."

"So you were planning a big announcement last night?"

"I was. My parents really are thrilled. The plan to find Stephen a bride doesn't seem to have yielded much in terms of results for him, but at least it helped me find you."

Jack melted the ice structure and I found that the storm had blown itself out. Looking around, I saw that I hadn't gone nearly as far as I'd thought from the castle. If Jack and I had been able to see the night before, we could have easily returned, but we had both been so turned around that we also might have wandered for hours without touching anything. I could still see bits of the frozen lake through the trees, where naturally growing mistletoe was frosted with ice and snow.

"I love how everything looks after a blizzard," Jack told me, staring around at the landscape. The castle, surprisingly close for how far it had felt the night before, was veiled in a soft blanket of snow, the stone walls and turrets dusted with white. Large icicles hung from the battlements, glinting in the pale blue light of the winter sun.

The delicate foliage in the courtyard was bowed under the weight of the recent snowfall, and a serene silence met my ears. Other than the occasional creak of the ice from the distant lake or the soft *floomp* of snow falling from one of the trees, the air was still. Each breath felt crisp and biting, and each exhale left a misty vapor in the cold.

"Thank you for saving me," I told Jack, interlacing our fingers.

He grinned at me, then grazed his lips on my knuckles. "Let's go tell my parents we're safe."

CHAPTER 18

When we got back inside the castle, a flurry of commotion met us. Physicians and nurses hurried back and forth, shouting instructions to each other as they dashed around, scurrying like mice before a cat.

Jack caught one of the doctors by the arm. "What's going on?"

"Two of the women never took off the ice slippers from last night. One of them has dreadful frostbite, and we will need to amputate parts of her feet immediately."

Vallia and Vanessa! I had never had much sympathy for my stepsisters, but now I ran after the doctors as they tore up to the guest rooms with their satchels full of medical supplies.

As we drew nearer to their room, a woman's hysterical cries nearly paralyzed me with fright. Doctors and nurses, looking panicked and frantic, shoved their way through the doors to tend to my stepsister.

It wasn't a pretty sight. Both Vallia and Vanessa had finally removed the ice slippers, but while Vallia's feet looked normal, Vanessa's feet were discolored and swollen, and some parts had even turned an ugly black color. My hands flew up to cover my mouth, aghast. Though my stepsisters were panicked about the appearance of Vanessa's feet, it didn't sound as though she was in any physical pain. Had the nerves died so much that they were unaware of the pain?

“What’s wrong with my feet?” Vanessa cried. “Why did they go all black? I can’t feel anything!”

“How did you keep the slippers on that long?” Jack asked, looking even more horrified than my stepsister did as he stared at her feet. “They were supposed to be too cold to wear.”

“I didn’t feel anything unusual,” Vallia sobbed, tears pouring down her face. The physicians examined her feet and found nothing unusual. “But look what they did to my sister!”

“He’s to blame!” Vanessa shrieked, pointing dramatically at Jack.

“Yes! It’s all the mage’s fault!” Valencia glowered. “How could you do this to my daughter?”

Jack backed away from their accusatory fingers, even paler than usual. “I didn’t mean for this to happen,” he said, staring horrified at the doctors as they pulled out scalpels.

One of the nurses pointed at Vanessa’s left foot. “These three toes need to go, and the heel of the other foot.”

Jack’s pale complexion drained of all color. “I…I don’t understand why the magic malfunctioned.”

“Come on,” I told him, steering him toward the door. “You don’t need to see this.”

“I don’t understand,” he kept repeating, over and over. “She shouldn’t have been able to bear the pain unless the ice turned warm for her like it did for you.” Then a look of sheer terror crossed his face. “Take your shoes off.”

Obediently, I sat and stripped off the ice slippers. Jack knelt and lifted my feet, inspecting them from every angle, but they appeared and felt fine. He ran his hand through his hair as he slumped down against the wall and stared at the slippers. “I don’t understand. How could this have happened? You and Vallia were fine. Why wasn’t Vanessa?”

“It isn’t your fault,” I said automatically.

“Then whose could it be? I was the one who enchanted the slippers. It worked for everyone else. Why not her? I’ve ruined her life. What if she never walks again?”

“I don’t know.” I certainly didn’t like Vanessa, but that didn’t mean I wanted her to have her toes and heel amputated. “You

wouldn't do anything that would harm someone; I know it."

"But I did."

"Jack!" Both of us turned to see the king hurrying down the hall toward us, the queen trotting along beside him. "We heard what happened." He looked at the door in concern, where my stepsister's hysterical shrieks were still reverberating off the walls.

"And we're glad you're safe, Noelle," Queen Isolde added. "You gave us such a fright last night." She spoke to me even as she, too, looked anxiously at the door to my stepfamily's chambers.

"It looks bad," Jack said miserably.

"Let's go see," the king said, resolutely squaring his shoulders and adjusting his crown. He reached down to pull Jack up to stand, who in turn did the same for me.

I held Jack's hand for support as we all filed back into the room, where the doctors were busily cutting away the blackened toes on one foot and the heel on the other. My stepmother sat in the corner, shielding her face from her daughters. Even though I despised the woman, my heart gave a small pang. I'd had to look away, too. I'd never done well with blood, and I couldn't imagine having to watch such an operation be performed on one's own child.

Leaving Jack with his parents, I approached my stepmother. "I'm sorry," I told her quietly. She glanced up at me, then hurriedly looked away. Queen Isolde had noticed our brief exchange. She came forward, eyebrows furrowed as she looked closely at Valencia, who was staring at the floor as if determined to count the number of stones.

"Glora?"

"My name's Valencia," my stepmother answered, but her voice shook.

The queen shook her head. "I never forget a face. You're Glora."

"Your midwife?" The king puffed out his chest and crossed the room to step protectively in front of his wife. "You were told never to come back here."

"I…I merely wished to thank you properly for what you gave me—"

"You were paid and told to leave."

I stared between the queen and my stepmother, confused.

"She's a mage," the queen said in hushed tones.

I looked at my stepmother, but didn't see any evidence to support the claim. Her hair was the model of perfectly curled auburn locks, without a strand out of place, just as always. She never missed an opportunity to examine her reflection in the mirror or fix her hair, which still didn't have a single strand of grey even as she aged… Understanding thunked into place faster than snow fell from rooftops. The thin, stretchy, skin-colored material Jack and I had found while searching her room suddenly made sense. "You wear a wig."

Valencia threw a dirty look at me. "It only took you three years to figure it out, did it?"

"Let's continue this conversation elsewhere," Queen Isolde said, looking pointedly at the doctors and nurses, all of whom seemed to be engrossed in their task but would have been able to easily overhear anything.

"I should stay here with my girls," Valencia said hesitantly.

"Don't disobey your queen." King Wenceslas spoke coldly. "Jack, Noelle, Glora, come."

Silently, Valencia rose and we all left, following the king. Once the door closed and we moved down the hall, Vanessa's screams redoubled, and Valencia flinched at the sound.

"In," the queen ordered Valencia, pointing into an empty room. We all filed in, and the queen gave two nods to the guards standing at attention on either side of the door.

Valencia stared at the floor, wringing her hands in front of her. Jack looked just as confused as I felt, and even the king had an eyebrow raised.

"She was one of the midwives at my birthing," the queen explained. "She can remove anyone's discomfort or pain when she focuses on them, so doctors often brought her along to their appointments so she could alleviate the patient's suffering. Once they saw I had twins and one was a mage, they all promised to never speak of it…except for her."

Valencia locked her jaw and said nothing, her features set in the same stubborn expression that often crossed my own face.

"She threatened to tell and said that people had the right to know, but back then, mages were often persecuted or taken from their families. We just wanted to protect Jack," Queen Isolde said in hushed tones. "Wenceslas and I paid an exorbitant sum to send her to a different kingdom, Sorana I believe, to start a new life."

"So, she likely hid that she was a mage and had her two daughters," I breathed. "But why return?"

"Your father was working on a great deal of laws related to mage rights," Jack pointed out.

"And that's how she met Papa. They became acquainted when he was speaking about mage rights." Additional understanding hit me with stampeding force. "That's why Papa always felt so healthy and energetic around her. He wasn't recovering from his illness; she was masking his pain."

"And when he left the estate to her," Jack chimed in, "she would have had to provide a birth certificate to validate that she was who she claimed to be. But since she used another identity—"

"It was a legal name change," Valencia interjected, holding her chin aloft. "I have the paperwork to prove it."

"Ah, but you would have needed to have the birth certificate, name change paperwork, and the marriage certificate, and when they checked your birth record, they would know that your marriage wasn't legal," Jack pointed out.

My mouth fell open and I addressed my stepmother. "So that is why you wanted that law to pass so badly. It was to grant full rights so you could inherit property and to legalize your marriage to Papa so he could pass the full estate on to you. It wasn't ever to help me. It was all for you. Then you would get everything."

Valencia's silence was confession enough. No wonder she always feigned an injury or faded into the background anytime the queen was around. The time when Jack had convinced Stephen to take my stepfamily to meet his mother to give Jack and me time to snoop through their rooms…of course Valencia had come back early to

avoid her. And she had faked an ankle injury when she'd learned that the queen would be in attendance when we presented the bill.

"Did Papa know?" I asked. "Did he know about you?"

Finally, she raised her eyes to meet mine. "Of course he knew. Why do you think he kept our wedding so private and never had us accompany him on his trips? Why do you think he always gave me ample time to get ready each day? It was to conceal it from everyone for my own safety. I knew exactly what would happen if I revealed myself to the public, and I was right."

"Glora, what did you do to your daughter?" the queen asked crisply.

"Nothing."

The look Queen Isolde gave her could have frozen the sun. "You want me to believe that you didn't mask the pain she experienced while wearing the slippers, hoping one of your girls would beat out the other competition and marry Stephen?"

Valencia didn't blush, but her eyes dropped in shame.

"You disgust me," King Wenceslas growled. "Your own daughter. How could you? Can't you hear her?"

She lifted her chin defiantly. "She didn't feel anything until you took me away. But you have no right to scold me. How could you abandon your own son and force him to live as a servant simply because he was born with magic? You claim you're helping mages, but do you have any idea how many years I was exploited for my abilities? You even did it yourself. And now you are forcing your son into servitude. Even if you don't care, I do."

"I chose my life," Jack snapped. "And you were the one trying to blackmail me."

"I've done more for mages than you ever have," Valencia said, glaring at Jack and me. "Both of you. I was the one encouraging Cedric to push for more bills. I was the one who secured those final signatures when no one else could."

"You shut down my school for mages!" I cried out. "I was helping them!"

"By segregating them?"

"By educating them when no one else would!" I shot back. "What, did you hope that by your daughter being injured, Jack would be blamed? He's a mage, just like you! You face the same prejudices."

"No, he's a mage born to privilege who has been shielded from what the world is *really* like for mages!" she snapped. "What does sitting in a castle do? Nothing! I was the one out there struggling to feed my family. I was the one actually getting signatures to initiate change instead of giving myself a pat on the back for helping the poor, pitiful mage children. You wanted praise for teaching them a few lessons, but I'm giving them a better future."

For the tiniest moment, I could see things from Valencia's point of view, and despite all reason, it made some sense. In many ways, she was right. While I'd been so focused on the day to day, she was the one ensuring that changes would last a lifetime.

"His birth," Valencia went on, "forced me out of my homeland and left me to fend for myself so that his identity could be concealed, but what of my entire life?" She turned to the king and queen. "You want to claim you fight for mages, but you cast me off without a second thought simply because I wanted to tell the truth. If anyone is in the wrong, it's everyone else here. I've done nothing worthy of being punished."

"What about Vanessa?"

Valencia's eyes filled with tears. "I didn't know that would happen. She only told me that they were uncomfortable, and I was trying to help ease her discomfort."

Stephen burst into the room. "I came as soon as I could," he panted.

"Even if you punish me," Valencia said, her voice changing from defensive to pleading, "my daughters kept their slippers on longest. One of them should marry the prince. Don't punish them for anything I've done."

Queen Isolde met her gaze levelly. "Your daughters won by cheating, and I won't have my son marry anyone he doesn't love. Stephen?"

Stephen crossed the room to his mother, avoiding looking at my stepmother.

"Are you in love with either of this woman's daughters?"

After a look at Valencia, Stephen shifted his weight from side to side and didn't say anything.

"Get the guards," Queen Isolde told her husband. "I'll need to question this woman further." King Wenceslas stuck his head out into the corridor to obey, and within a minute, Valencia had been escorted away.

"Stephen?" his mother probed. "Do you wish to pursue a relationship with any of the women from the balls?"

"I'm not prepared to propose to anyone right now. It's still too early, but I would like to get to know Vallia better. Just not around her sister and mother. She seems too scared around them to be herself, and I do think her feelings are genuine." He shot me a quizzical look.

I smiled. "I think that would be good for her. She does seem to like you. If you noticed, her feet aren't frostbitten."

Stephen smiled shyly.

"Jack dear?" the queen said, her eyes misty and soft. "With this new bill passed, we will finally be able to tell everyone that you're our son. You'll be recognized as the prince you are."

Jack remained quiet for so long that I wondered if he'd heard his mother. Then, he answered very softly, "Before I answer, I'd like to discuss it privately with Noelle."

With me?

"Take your time," Queen Isolde told us, shooing her husband and other son into the hall to wait.

"Noelle, now that relationships between people like us have been legalized, I want to be very clear about my intentions," Jack told me the moment the door was closed. "I have feelings for you, and I want to pursue a future with you, if you feel simil—"

"Yes, I do."

Joy lit up Jack's face, and he took my hands into his. "If I was named a prince or later became king, that would affect you as well. I didn't want to make this big of a decision without your input."

"I'll support you no matter what. You know that."

"Now you know why I was so confident you can get a license and secure funding for your school. Would you want to live here?"

I thought about it. Wasn't this every girl's dream—to marry a prince, become queen, and live happily ever after? I would want for nothing, and yet…that prospect held no joy for me. Being royalty came with constant scrutiny and advisors and chamberlains who controlled every moment of their schedule. I was happiest when I was teaching or ice skating, but I also knew that I didn't want to give up a future with Jack. "That isn't a decision for just me to make. I want you to do what makes you happy. Would you be happy being a prince?"

Jack slowly shook his head. "I don't think so, but I don't want to deprive you of a royal life if you want it."

I laughed out loud. "I *don't* want that, Jack. I want the freedom to go ice skating whenever we want. I want to teach and go on sled rides with you, and I wouldn't have that as a princess."

A light breeze of snow whirled up around the room as Jack's face split into the widest smile I'd ever seen. "That's what I want, too."

When the rest of his family re-entered, Jack took a deep breath. "I'm honored by your offer, but I'd much rather stay as I am."

His mother's face crumpled. "You don't want people to know you're our son? Think of what you could do, showing everyone that a mage is a prince."

"I don't have anything to prove. Our family knows, and now Noelle knows. That is enough for me. I'd much rather remain as I am, help Noelle with her school, and continue to be an advisor." He shot a mischievous look at Stephen. "Besides, I don't want to perform the same boring duties that Stephen has to deal with. I think I can do much more good talking to people without the clout of a royal name attached."

"You'll never reveal your surname?" Stephen asked.

"He can share mine," I said, glowing with happiness. "Jack Frost has a good ring to it."

King Wenceslas smiled at his son. "If that is what you want, you know we will gladly honor your wishes, and if you ever change your

mind, we will support that, too. I just wish we could claim you."

"I'm already claimed," Jack said with a smile, squeezing my fingers.

EPILOGUE

"I made you a new pair of ice slippers," Jack told me, handing them over. "They're enchanted to always stay warm."

"Worried about her getting *cold feet* on your wedding day, are you?" Beryl sniggered as I put them on. Peggy giggled as well, holding fast to Kodiak's leash and clutching the small pillow with my and Jack's golden wedding rings. We had lost five of the practice rings during rehearsal before we had decided to stitch them to the pillow.

Jack rolled his eyes at Beryl. "You've been dying to make that joke, haven't you?"

"Ever since that ball almost a year ago. This seemed like the perfect moment. And I think they're ready for you."

Jack straightened his suit jacket and left, leaving me with Beryl, Kodiak, and Peggy. I drew in a long, shuddering breath of excitement and listened to the rumble of the crowd behind the doors. As the first official wedding between a mage and non-mage, our ceremony had become a point of interest for the entire kingdom.

"You look beautiful," Peggy told me, staring in awe at my flowing dress. Jack had made his own additions to this gown as well, weaving tiny threads of his magical ice throughout so that I always felt warm even though the day was freezing cold.

"Thank you. Are you ready to help Kodiak do his job?"

"Yes!" Peggy swelled with pride at having such an important role.

Trumpets blasted, and my chest nearly exploded with joy. It was time.

Guards opened the doors and I slowly walked down the aisle while eleven pipers played a melodious tune that danced around the great hall. My toes wriggled inside the shoes, reveling in the constant heat. Up ahead, Jack's smile stretched across his face as he watched me get closer.

King Wenceslas and Queen Isolde sat on the front row, beaming at me as well. Almost all of the ten lords were present, but Valencia, who had been instated as the final lord, was the only exception. Even though she had petitioned to attend, saying that if it hadn't been for her, Jack and I never would have met, I denied her request to come to the wedding, as well as Vanessa's. Vallia, however, was in attendance, sitting next to Stephen and holding his hand. They had yet to announce an engagement, but Jack and I had predicted that it was only a matter of time. Ever a friend, Trista and her now-husband Cal sat close to Stephen and Vallia, and Trista held their sleeping newborn in her arms, rocking him gently from side to side.

The actual ceremony flashed by. Jack and I couldn't stop smiling at each other so by the time the priest had finished speaking, my cheeks hurt.

"You have the rings?" he asked Jack.

Right on cue, Peggy came through the doors, holding Kodiak's leash. Kodiak trotted down the aisle, carrying the pillow bearing our rings and wagging his tail like a fluffy banner. It was fortunate we had sewn the rings on, because halfway down the aisle, he dropped the pillow and sniffed enthusiastically at one of my mage students' shoes. Laughter rippled through the crowd as Peggy hastily stuffed the pillow back into Kodiak's mouth and pointed him up to where I stood.

Kodiak's ears pricked forward, and he padded down the carpet once more until he finally reached up and proudly deposited the soggy cushion into the priest's hand. I smiled to myself as the priest tried his best to hide his disgust at the slobber dripping into his palm. Kodiak sat, watching the crowd with his tongue lolling to the side, as proud as if he were the one getting married.

Jack's electric-blue eyes sparkled as he slipped a ring onto my finger, and immediately, frost crept around the band so that the diamond sparkled more than ever. A light snow began to fall over the assembly, who all oohed and aahed, holding their hands out to touch the soft snowflakes and marveling aloud how Jack could create such a phenomenon indoors.

"I now pronounce you man and wife!" the priest announced loudly. "You may kiss the bride."

Jack swept me into a kiss that wasn't forbidden in the least.

"Go on, get out of here," we heard Beryl call as we broke apart.

Twelve drummers lined the carpet leading outside to where the dog sled was staked, and the dogs added their barking and howls to the drumming and the crowd's cheering so that the cacophony nearly deafened me. On the way to the dog sled, I spotted Stephen and Vallia, applauding along with everyone else. I threw my bouquet to Vallia, who caught it, surprised, then blushed pink and buried her nose into the flowers.

Shining golden bells had been fastened all over Jack's sled, and as we pulled out, they rang merrily through the crisp winter air. The cheering from the crowd faded until we only heard the sled's runners whisking through the snow.

"Only a week before we're back to our regular work again," Jack told me. "We'd better enjoy it while it lasts."

"What's not to enjoy when we get back? We'll finally be able to live together, and Cinder will have her puppies soon—"

"And they will undoubtedly be the fastest dog sled team in the kingdom. I just wish Pumpkin wanted to run, too."

I laughed. "He's much too busy being fed treats all day."

It was true. Pumpkin was living up to his name and becoming just as round as a gourd from all the treats my students snuck to him when I wasn't looking. He had been adopted as the new school's mascot, and I found no shortage of doodles of pumpkins with dog faces in the margins of my students' work throughout the school day.

"At least Valencia can't shut this school down."

"Thank goodness for that." Since it was entirely legal and intended for Valencia to inherit the estate and act as the next lord, my stepmother had thrown herself into her duties. She refused to reopen my original school and instead lobbied to have mages accepted into all schools throughout the kingdom without any segregation, which I grudgingly had to admit was even better for the mage community than what I'd done. Valencia no longer wore wigs, but styled her white hair proudly as she championed mage rights just as fiercely as I had done, but now with the money and power of being a lord. Even though I still didn't care for her personally, I could accept that my way was not the only way.

But my passion for teaching was still deeply engrained in me, and even though I didn't teach exclusively mages any longer, I had opened a new school and several of my former students transferred in so I had a higher percentage of mages that I taught alongside Jack each day. We had ice skating and dog racing teams that competed throughout the kingdom.

We pulled to a stop in front of the house that Jack had built for us, nestled beside the lake where we first skated together. Now, we would be able to skate anytime we wanted, we were equally close to the castle's dog yard and the new school, and I couldn't imagine ever wanting anything else.

In the months after she'd been announced as the next lord, Valencia had let slip several snide remarks about how my mission had failed, and I supposed I could say that she was right. I hadn't saved my original school and I hadn't gotten any inheritance, but I'd gotten something so much better.

I had Jack.

THANK YOU!

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed Jack and Noelle's romance, please consider leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads. Reviews help your fellow readers find books they will love, and even a sentence or two is so helpful!

To get notifications about upcoming books, get bonus content, and see behind-the-scenes glimpses at my writing process, sign up for my newsletter, and you will also get a bonus novella—A Curse of Gold and Beauty, which is only available to newsletter subscribers.

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